

PART II

# Urban Ecologies



## CHAPTER TWO

# Urban Ecocriticism and Spanish Cultural Studies

How do we stop ourselves from fulfilling our fates as suicidally  
productive drones in a carbon-addicted hive, destroying ourselves  
in some kind of psychopathic colony collapse disorder?

—Roy Scranton<sup>1</sup>

### 2.1. Spanish Urban Ecocriticism

In 1999, Michael Bennett and David W. Teague complained about ‘the historical gap between environmentalism, cultural studies, and the urban experience’.<sup>2</sup> These urban cultural scholars had noticed that ecocriticism paid insufficient attention to the urban environment and that there was a need for an urban ecological cultural criticism. In response, they edited a volume of essays—*The Nature of Cities: Ecocriticism and Urban Environments*—intended to ‘provide the parameters for an urban ecocriticism that offers the ecological component often missing from cultural analyses of the city and the urban perspective often lacking in environmental approaches to contemporary culture’.<sup>3</sup> Although cultural critics’ interest in urban ecocriticism today is greater than ever before, it is still relatively scarce, and there is plenty of room for further scholarly explorations of the topic. In a recent book, *Urban Ecologies*, Christopher Schliephake rightly argues that

urban life, rather than constituting a solely human-dominated domain, is conditioned by the interaction with nonhuman life forms and agents—interactions that are themselves subject to public debate and cultural

1 Scranton, *Learning to Die*, 85–86.

2 Michael Bennett and David W. Teague, ‘Urban Ecocriticism: An Introduction’, in *The Nature of Cities: Ecocriticism and Urban Environments*, ed. Michael Bennett and David W. Teague (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1999), 10.

3 Bennett and Teague, ‘Urban Ecocriticism’, 9.

imagination. In other words, spatial-material processes constitute the framework of urban life, and it is on the cultural-discursive level that their inner workings and interrelations are reflected and imbued with meaning. It is in and through culture that urbanity emerges as an ecological system.<sup>4</sup>

Schliephake finds that cultural urban ecology proves very fruitful for ‘the analysis of cultural representations of contemporary urbanity’.<sup>5</sup>

Of course, these cultural urban ecocritical approaches are still extremely rare in Spanish cultural studies, where frameworks born of ecocriticism or urban studies were never fluid, let alone convergent. Spanish ecocriticism is only now emerging timidly. Nevertheless, the last decade has seen an impressive growth of scholarship in Iberian literary and cultural studies that places the city at the forefront of its cultural analysis, following the pioneering works of scholars such as Susan Larson, Malcolm Compitello, and Joan Ramon Resina.<sup>6</sup> Special issues focusing on Hispanic cities and culture have mushroomed over the last decade in academic journals such as *Letras Peninsulares*, *Colorado Review*, *Letras Femeninas*, *Ciberletras*, and the *Arizona Journal of Hispanic Cultural Studies*. A book series devoted to Hispanic urban studies, edited by Benjamin Fraser and Susan Larson, has recently been created, and new volumes on urban cultural studies are appearing in existing series such as *Contemporary Hispanic and Lusophone Cultures*, published by Liverpool University Press. Nevertheless, although Iberian cultural studies has avidly incorporated urban approaches in the past few years, these approaches rarely move beyond urban geography and sociology itself to take into account how urban cultural processes interact with the socioecological intricacies of cities. While most of these contributions deal with notions of urban space and representation, hardly any of them consider how the environmental aspects of the city affect culture, and how urban culture in turn shapes the ways in which we approach and transform (materially and symbolically) that environment.<sup>7</sup>

4 Christopher Schliephake, *Urban Ecologies: City Space, Material Agency, and Environmental Politics in Contemporary Culture* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2015), xiii.

5 Schliephake, *Urban Ecologies*, xxvii.

6 See, for instance, Susan Larson, *Constructing and Resisting Modernity* (Madrid: Vervuert/Iberoamericana, 2011); Malcolm Alan Compitello and Edward Baker, *De Fortunata a la M:40: un siglo de cultura de Madrid* (Madrid: Alianza Editorial, 2003); Joan Ramon Resina, *Iberian Cities* (New York: Routledge, 2001).

7 One exception is a recent article by Matthew Feinberg and Susan Larson, ‘Cultivating the Square: Trash, Recycling, and the Cultural Ecology of Post-Crisis

The very absence of a Spanish urban ecocriticism is significant because it draws our attention to the blank spaces on our theoretical radars, which in turn indicate our epistemological limitations. To fill these spaces, this chapter intends to combine the momentum of current Spanish urban cultural studies with insights from urban ecocriticism in particular and the environmental humanities in general. My movement towards a Spanish urban ecocriticism is not driven by a tortuous theoretical argument. Rather, it follows the logical path that appears if the transformative and interdisciplinary spirit of urban cultural studies is developed to its fullest extent.

Inspired by Marxist urban theorist Henry Lefebvre, in his recent book *Toward an Urban Cultural Studies* Benjamin Fraser envisions an ‘urban cultural studies’ that places the humanities and the social sciences in dialogue to achieve an emergent ‘framework for understanding urban culture in general terms ... forcing literary and cultural studies to think the city geographically and forcing geography to think the city artistically’.<sup>8</sup> Although this movement is certainly welcome, it is not sufficient to ‘disalienate humanities scholarship’ by dismantling ‘the divisions across disciplines—their alienation from one another’.<sup>9</sup> Given that cultural production in particular and humans in general are embedded in the biophysical space of the planet and depend on the proper functioning of the systems and cycles of the biosphere, why not go a step further and include the ecological sciences in the conversation, as the environmental humanities would recommend? If we recognize that cities and their urban cultural and material processes have played a huge role in the massive biogeochemical changes that the Anthropocene has wrought—due to the fact that urban metabolisms mobilize energy, materials, and imaginaries far beyond their geographical limits—why not include these socioecological processes and the ‘hyperobjects’ they produce when we explore the mutually constitutive relationships ‘between material conditions and cultural imaginaries’?<sup>10</sup> Rather than merely investing in an ‘urban-centered work of interdisciplinarity scholarship’,<sup>11</sup> we could push this interdisciplinarity momentum further and focus on a more decentered cultural urban ecology that recognizes the interconnections between cultural transformations, urban metabolisms, and ecological dynamics on a global scale. If we are willing to take interdisciplinarity seriously in the age of the

Madrid’, in *Ethics of Life: Contemporary Iberian Debates*, ed. Katarzyna Beilin and William Viestenz (Nashville, TN: Vanderbilt University Press, 2016), 113–142.

8 Benjamin Fraser, *Toward an Urban Cultural Studies: Henri Lefebvre and the Humanities* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 2–3.

9 Fraser, *Toward an Urban Cultural Studies*, 81.

10 Fraser, *Toward an Urban Cultural Studies*, 20.

11 Fraser, *Toward an Urban Cultural Studies*, 4.

Anthropocene (which also entails the age of the planetary urbanization of capital), we must collapse not only the barriers between the humanities and the social sciences but, more importantly, those between human and natural history and all that this implies.

Neil Badmington remarks that ‘while cultural studies has transformed the humanities, it has not, in my opinion, questioned one of the most troubling aspects of the humanities’, namely, ‘the hierarchical border between the human and the inhuman’.<sup>12</sup> In my opinion, for any emancipatory urban cultural criticism to make sense of the Anthropocene, it must, among other things, move to the foreground the underappreciated Marxist notion of the ‘metabolic rift’ while abandoning the anthropocentric impulses ingrained in cultural studies which fuel the many neoliberal fantasies of human exceptionalism and planetary managerialism. Otherwise, we risk reproducing over and over different versions of the same anthropological machine that unleashes its exploitative and rapacious rationality on everything.

The preceding remarks should not be interpreted as a critique of Fraser’s innovative and suggestive elaboration of a Lefebvrian urban cultural studies. Rather, they offer an invitation to take his argument further. Why must an interdisciplinary approach to the age of the Anthropocene be limited to the humanities and social sciences? Why not champion the recalibrated Marxism of Lefebvre, rearticulated by Fraser, and elaborate upon the concept of urban alienation in relation to the more-than-human world? Why not bring together cultural studies and urban political ecology? This fusion will allow us to investigate the interconnected social and ecological alienation inherent in urban capitalist cultures and to explore how this alienation depletes both humans and the nonhuman as they interact with and mutually constitute each other. Fraser suggests (and I could not agree more) that a cultural critic’s most important task should be to reconcile the various alienated spheres of specialized knowledge (and, I add, nonspecialized knowledge as well). Unfortunately, as Fraser rightly laments, criticism could easily end up doing just the opposite by reaffirming ‘existing alienations that prevent an apprehension of the totality of contemporary urban life’.<sup>13</sup> I would argue that any approach to culture that constantly and unconsciously overlooks the ecological dimension at a moment when the ecological crisis is impossible to ignore risks perpetuating the more dangerous alienation that allows different kinds of social and ecological exploitation: namely, the human-nonhuman divide.

12 Badmington, ‘Cultural Studies and the Posthumanities’, 261, 262.

13 Fraser, *Toward an Urban Cultural Studies*, 86.

Like Fraser, urban geographer David Harvey pays little attention to the possibilities and potentialities of an urban political ecology in his own Lefebvire-inspired and recalibrated Marxist book, *Rebel Cities*. Harvey clearly articulates the crucial role that urbanization has played historically in the absorption of capital accumulation by dispossession through predatory urban practices.<sup>14</sup> He also emphasizes the need to mobilize the revolutionary anticapitalist political possibilities of the impoverished heterogeneous masses who are excluded from decisions regarding the urban model and denied access to the enjoyment of the urban commons to whose creation they have contributed. However, if we prioritize the struggle of the urban precariat, we risk overlooking the fiercer and bloodier struggle occurring on the commodity frontiers, what Naomi Klein calls 'Blockadia'.<sup>15</sup> Most of these struggles are not urban-centric, but they are key actors in the global socioecological revolution of which the urban precariat is only a part. Focusing excessively on the urban precariat could contribute to silencing and diminishing the important struggle of a 'new environmental precariat' led by women and indigenous peoples who are resisting the metabolic expansion of the urban-agro-industrial system.<sup>16</sup> The main scenario of the struggle for this environmental precariat is not always the city, but they are all nonetheless resisting the process of planetary urbanization from the operational landscapes that make the extension of such processes possible.

Neoliberal urban policy, Harvey observes, conceives the planned city in the image envisioned by financial speculators, bankers, developers, and technocrats. As such, 'capitalist urbanization perpetually tends to destroy the city as a social, political and livable commons' and, I would add, depletes the planet as a biologically and culturally diverse place through its expansive appropriation and absorption of biomass, nutrients, and energy, as well as waste production.<sup>17</sup> The 'urbanization of capital presupposes the capacity of capitalist class power to dominate the urban process. This implies domination ... [over populations'] lifestyles as well as their labor power, their cultural and political values as well as their mental conceptions of

14 David Harvey, *Rebel Cities: From the Right to the City to the Urban Revolution* (London: Verso, 2012), 22, 53–57.

15 'Blockadia is not a specific location on a map, but rather a roving transnational conflict zone that is cropping up with increasing frequency and intensity wherever extractive projects are attempting to dig and drill, whether for open-pit mines, or gas fracking, or tar sands oil pipelines'. Naomi Klein, *This Changes Everything: Capitalism vs the Climate* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2014), 294–295.

16 Foster, Clark, and York, *The Ecological Rift*, 47, 440.

17 Harvey, *Rebel Cities*, 80.

the world'.<sup>18</sup> I concur with Harvey that, to effectively resist and contest this domination, we need to collectively enact our right to recreate the city 'in a completely different image' and not limit the struggle to reclaiming 'a right to that which already exists'.<sup>19</sup> I claim that to do this it is important to envision postgrowth urban imaginaries. In order to challenge the dominant imaginary and to create something beyond the epistemological limitations self-imposed by the hegemonic rationality, it is paramount to expose the roots of the dominant logic that separates human and nonhuman concerns. To keep this in mind as cultural critics, it would be helpful to mobilize the following socioecological concepts when approaching city *naturecultures*: metabolic rift and urban metabolism.<sup>20</sup>

### 2.1.1. Metabolic Rift and Urban Metabolism

The notion of a metabolic rift was popularized by Karl Marx, who pointed out the problem of the growing rift in the metabolic exchange between humans and the planet provoked by capitalist urbanization. Although Marx focused mostly on the disruption of nutrient cycles generated by the increasing urban demand for externally produced agricultural products, the notion can be extended to include the rapid transgression of planetary boundaries that we are witnessing today. Marx interpreted the increase in agricultural produce sent from the countryside to the cities as a robbery of nutrients that do not return to the soil but instead remain in the cities and cause pollution.<sup>21</sup> Today, given that the number of people living in urban settlements has grown exponentially and that agroindustry is the main contributor to ecological destruction—in the form of biodiversity loss, soil erosion, water depletion, and nutrients' disruption—the metabolic rift caused by the urbanization of capital is even wider. Intense ongoing transformations in both urban and rural areas are the consequence of this planetary urban process. As Neil Brenner explains, this process includes not only changes in the physical space of cities, but also the transformation of massive 'non-urban' operational geographies needed to maintain the functions of the urban agglomerations (waste sinks, agro-industrial enclosures, and extractive, logistic, and communication and transportation infrastructures, etc.). This process of 'extended urbanization', as Brenner

18 Harvey, *Rebel Cities*, 66.

19 Harvey, *Rebel Cities*, 138.

20 See Luis I. Prádanos, 'Exploring the Political Ecology of Iberian Studies', in *A Polemical Companion to 'Ethics of Life: Contemporary Iberian Debates'*, ed. Katarzyna Beilin and William Viestenz (Nashville, TN: Vanderbilt University Press, 2016), 49–54, <https://drive.google.com/file/d/oB6nyHHBXY48bY3Q5NUVVM2JjMkU/view>.

21 Foster, Clark, and York, *The Ecological Rift*, 45.

calls it, transforms all the planet—including terrestrial, subterranean, oceanic, and atmospheric space—by putting it in the service of a process of urban capitalist development in constant acceleration and intensification.<sup>22</sup> As such, the metabolic rift is the result of the urban growth-oriented imaginary as it materializes. This rift ‘can only be healed through a new revolutionary transformation in human social and ecological relations’ entailing the unification of the struggles for social justice and ecological sustainability.<sup>23</sup> I believe that urban cultural studies could contribute to this radical transformation by embracing urban ecocriticism and investigating the social and ecological consequences (in the urban environment and beyond) of global metabolic urban processes and their coevolving cultural imaginaries.<sup>24</sup>

The work of Jason W. Moore achieves a fruitful combination of world systems theory, environmental history, and a revitalized notion of metabolic rift that illuminates the relationship between capitalist expansive dynamics and the current organization of world ecology.<sup>25</sup> He argues that capitalism always resolves its main contradiction, its dependency on the availability of uncaptured nature (human and nonhuman) and its tendency to rapidly deplete it, by ‘endless geographical expansion and endless innovation’.<sup>26</sup> Expansion and innovation are processes that cannot be separated either materially or symbolically. Moore considers that the current phase of capitalism ‘has reached the limits of its developmental possibilities’, as shown by the ‘interconnected food, energy, and financial crises of 2008’. The development of the late capitalist ecological regime was made possible by ‘the two great commodity booms—both centered in oil and agriculture—of the end of this long 20th century’. The era of cheap food and cheap oil is now over.<sup>27</sup> In other words, globally there is no more room to easily expand the metabolic order of capitalism and its planetary urbanization of capital without collapsing the planet’s ecology. It is important to remember that, in the urban-agro-industrial system, food and fossil-fuel energy are

22 Neil Brenner, *Teoría urbana crítica y políticas de escala*, ed. Álvaro Sevilla Buitrago (Barcelona: Icaria, 2017): 263–266.

23 Foster, Clark, and York, *The Ecological Rift*, 49.

24 Fernández Durán, *El antropoceno*, 16–23.

25 Moore, ‘Environmental Crises and the Metabolic Rift in World-Historical Perspective’.

26 Jason W. Moore, ‘Ecology and the Accumulation of Capital. A Brief Environmental History of Neoliberalism’, paper presented at the workshop ‘Food, Energy, Environment: Crisis of the Modern World-System’, Fernand Braudel Center, Binghamton University, October 9–10, 2009, 22.

27 Moore, ‘Ecology and the Accumulation of Capital’, 26.

highly interdependent (each calorie of urban petro-food requires about ten calories of fossil fuel). If Moore is right in suggesting that we are facing an ‘epochal shift in the history of capitalism that expresses the (asymptomatic) exhaustion of frontiers’, the problem cannot be solved by the usual process of innovation and imperialistic expansion without transgressing more planetary boundaries and causing a socioecological collapse.<sup>28</sup> The only rational reaction to this situation ‘is a radical change of course’.<sup>29</sup>

Cultural and urban ecologist Herbert Girardet clearly explains why ‘modern cities’ use of resources is highly problematic. They have an essentially linear, unidirectional metabolism, with resources flowing through the urban system without much concern about their origin, or about the destination of wastes. Inputs and outputs are treated as largely unconnected.<sup>30</sup> This linear metabolism interferes with the biosphere cyclical processes of reabsorption and regeneration and depletes the resources deployed by the urban system, generating massive pollution and biological annihilation. ‘As they perform their function, then, cities are “entropy accelerators”—they deplete and downgrade the resources they depend on in the process of using them’.<sup>31</sup> But urban systems would not have to be that way if they were able to detach from the dominant growth-oriented, linear logic. They could actually enhance biospheric capabilities.<sup>32</sup> Although the historical relation between the evolution of capitalism and the evolution of modern industrial cities with linear metabolisms is correlative, this does not mean that the existence of cities is contingent upon the acceptance of unsustainable linear metabolisms. Under a different imaginary, new urban models can emerge. Through a feedback loop, cities with circular metabolisms could regenerate themselves and their imaginaries, as Girardet suggests. An urban circular system would minimize external inputs and generate near zero waste, and thus cities would be designed so that all spent resources are reintegrated into the metabolic process over and over again. Such cities could even become carbon sinks rather than carbon factories. According to Girardet, this transition requires trading the Petropolis model (cities whose functions depend on massive inputs of fossil fuels and many other resources) for an Ecopolis model (cities that are not only sustainable, but socially and ecologically regenerative).

28 Moore, ‘Ecology and the Accumulation of Capital’, 22.

29 Foster, Clark, and York, *The Ecological Rift*, 426.

30 Herbert Girardet, *Creating Regenerative Cities* (New York: Routledge, 2015), 68.

31 Girardet, *Creating Regenerative Cities*, 69.

32 Saskia Sassen, ‘A Third Space: Neither Fully Urban nor Fully of the Biosphere’, in *Climate Architecture and the Planetary Imaginary* (New York: Columbia Books on Architecture and the City, 2016), 172–179.

This transition will not be easy, for the current rules of the ‘carbon-capital complex’ encourage the perpetuation of a Petropolis that is constantly competing with other cities, nationally and internationally, in the restless race to attract capital and foster growth, no matter the social and ecological cost. However, as Saskia Sassen reminds us, cities, more than nation-states, will be forced to actively confront the environmental challenges of the Anthropocene. Because cities are today at the center of the environmental problem, they must become part of the solution. Global cities have metabolisms that affect the entire planet and form a complex network with other cities. This network ‘contains the site of power of some of the most destructive actors, but also potentially the sites at which to demand accountability of these actors.’<sup>33</sup>

For cities to become part of the solution, it is paramount to understand that they are open socioecological systems.<sup>34</sup> For cities to be sustainable, they must be both ecologically and socially regenerative. That implies thinking of urban policy and planning in terms of ‘just sustainabilities’, as Julian Agyeman suggests. Sustainable cities need to be designed not only to be environmentally sound, but also to improve the quality of life and well-being of their inhabitants while promoting justice and equality.<sup>35</sup> Without social equality and cultural plurality, cities are unlikely to become sustainable. Thus, ‘achieving “just sustainabilities” will require a shift from current reformist strategies toward [urban] policy, planning, and practice for transformational change.’<sup>36</sup> Consequently, ‘what is needed are [*sic*] positive, inclusive narratives of change in which the entire system is “reimagined”—narratives in which just sustainabilities are understood as a basis for security and in(ter)dependence.’<sup>37</sup> These narratives and their associated practices are what I call ‘postgrowth urban imaginaries’.

In this context, municipalities are faced with the dilemma of either maintaining the inertia of neoliberal urbanization and eventually collapsing socially, ecologically, and financially—as environmental problems pile up and the supply of cheap food and cheap energy decreases and both become unaffordable—or transitioning from a Petropolis with a linear urban metabolism to an Ecolopolis with a circular one. There are two main obstacles to achieving this postcarbon transition. The first is the inertia of the current

33 Saskia Sassen, ‘Cities Are at the Center of Our Environmental Future’, *S.A.P.I.E.N.* 2, no. 3 (2010), <https://sapiens.revues.org/948>.

34 Sassen, ‘Cities Are at the Center of Our Environmental Future’.

35 Julian Agyeman, *Introducing Just Sustainabilities: Policy, Planning, and Practice* (London: Zed Books, 2013), 7.

36 Agyeman, *Introducing Just Sustainabilities*, 165.

37 Agyeman, *Introducing Just Sustainabilities*, 168.

infrastructure, which facilitates the perpetuation of growth-oriented practices and obstructs the implementation of other ways of inhabiting the city. To overcome this inertia, we could envision and cultivate what Dominic Boyer calls ‘revolutionary infrastructure’.<sup>38</sup> The second obstacle is that global capitalist powers will oppose any attempt to move towards a convivial urban model by deploying all the weapons of their institutionalized arsenal: media disinformation and manipulation campaigns, capital networks, political bribery, neoliberal trade agreements, ‘legal’ instruments, lobbies, harassment, and military intervention. Every counter-movement initiated by an urban community will inevitably be precarious, given its inferior position in relation to the capitalist establishment, and its emergent imaginaries would certainly unleash unpredictable reactions and unintended consequences. Perhaps Madrid and Barcelona, whose mayors were elected on political platforms that emerged out of the 15-M movement, can lead the way. Ada Colau, mayor of Barcelona, began her tenure by challenging the neoliberal model of urbanization in several ways: rethinking tourism, enforcing environmental regulations, embracing co-ops and solar energy,<sup>39</sup> and opposing the unpopular transatlantic trade agreement secretly negotiated by elites. Interestingly, Barcelona en comú, Colau’s party, ‘won the election of the city without mentioning growth once in its programme’.<sup>40</sup> The mayor of Madrid, Manuela Carmena, also favors an urban model that fosters conviviality and equality rather than promoting capital accumulation for the well-off, while at the same time significantly reducing the debt of the city. Both mayors favor a very promising feminist urbanism at odds with the dominant growth imaginary. There may indeed be light at the end of the tunnel, but corporate media either ignores or misrepresents such light as darkness.

### 2.1.2. Towards Postgrowth Urban Imaginaries

One of the tasks I envision for urban ecocriticism is to track how counterhegemonic cultural processes challenge the dominant conception of cities as growth machines and envision postgrowth urban ecologies. I divide the study of post-2008 urban cultural manifestations into four distinct but non-exclusive categories, according to the way in which the socioecological

<sup>38</sup> Dominic Boyer, ‘Revolutionary Infrastructure’, in *Infrastructures and Social Complexity: A Companion*, ed. Penelope Harvey, Casper Bruun Jensen, and Atsuro Morita (New York: Routledge, 2017), 174–186.

<sup>39</sup> Sebastiaan Faber and Bécquer Seguí, ‘Welcome to Sunny Barcelona, Where the Government Is Embracing Coops, Citizen Activism, and Solar Energy’, *The Nation*, August 2, 2016.

<sup>40</sup> Kallis, *In Defense of Degrowth*, 33.

metabolism of the city is conceived and depicted in relation to both the dominant imaginary of economic growth and its unsustainable energy regime. I hope other Iberian scholars find these interpretative categories useful for reading contemporary cultural manifestations through the lens of urban ecocriticism (beyond the multiple examples I provide in the following pages). The first of these interpretative categories explores the current negative social and ecological outcomes of neoliberal urban development in the context of the ongoing Spanish crisis by focusing on the discarded output of the urban linear metabolism: massive waste and precarious lives. The second category incorporates futuristic post-petroleum narratives, depicting the negative dystopian consequences of amplifying into the future the existing linear urban metabolic dysfunctions related to Petropolis. Relying on the fear generated by apocalyptic scenarios, these critiques are limited in their effectiveness because they do not offer any positive alternatives (on a related note, we will see in Chapter 4 why catastrophism may not be the best way to contest the dominant imaginary). The third category considers narratives that foreground the 'nonurban' geographies and cultures radically affected by the expansion of urban metabolisms. These narratives often envision a more or less forced neo-ruralization as a way of escaping the increasing unviability of urban life, but they may actually perpetuate (discursively) the rural-urban dichotomy that generated the metabolic rift in the first place. Finally, the last category focuses on the most effective strategy for criticizing the dominant urban imaginary, namely, cultural manifestations and social movements that dare to imagine, envision, articulate, and promote a postgrowth urban model that is socially desirable and environmentally sustainable. So-called 'nowtopians' intend to solve the problems caused by the metabolic rift by replacing urban linear metabolisms with circular ones (transition towns, slow cities); the measures they propose include urban agroecology and community gardens, child and health care cooperatives, urban permaculture, decentralized clean energy cooperatives, time banks, composting urban waste, collaborative economies, local currencies, open software, and participatory budgeting. Urban nowtopians often prefer to reimagine the city as a postgrowth settlement rather than promoting a counterproductive neo-ruralization that would perpetuate the rural-urban distinction that caused the metabolic rift in the first place.<sup>41</sup>

The suggested interpretative typology can be enumerated and summarized as the following four categories: The Crisis of the Urban

41 For the term 'nowtopians', see Chris Carlsson, 'Nowtopians', in *Degrowth: A Vocabulary for a New Era*, ed. Giacomo D'Alisa, Federico Demaria, and Giorgos Kallis (New York: Routledge, 2015), 182–184.

Growth Machine, Urban Collapse and Post-Petroleum Futures, Non-urban Spaces and Neo-ruralization, and Postgrowth Urban Imaginaries. Of course, some cultural expressions might fruitfully be read through more than one of these four categories at the same time. Nevertheless, this interpretative typology offers some guidelines for urban cultural critics as they rethink cities as socioecological open systems and refocus their analysis on the way in which urban metabolisms are represented. In the remaining pages, I will demonstrate the usefulness of this typology by applying it to a range of post-2008 Iberian literary and cultural manifestations.

## 2.2. Interpretative Typology

### 2.2.1. The Crisis of the Urban Growth Machine: Challenging Petromodernity

In the past few years, more and more cultural productions have challenged the grand narrative of progress equated with capitalist development and the acritical celebration of economic growth ingrained in the dominant imaginary. This chapter focuses on the urban ecocritical aspects of such challenges: namely, how the production and appropriation of space by the urbanization of capital creates an unsustainable social metabolism that is detrimental to both social conviviality and environmental health within and beyond the city limits. The built environment that characterizes modern cities and its functions is embedded in global material and symbolic networks of imperialism, toxicity, and destruction. From this perspective, it becomes obvious that the celebration of visible urban mega-infrastructures in Spain hides the proliferation of waste, pollution, and human/nonhuman displacement caused by neoliberal urbanization.

Out of many possible examples, I have selected three films that use different techniques and address diverse topics but are very effective in revealing the problems brought about by the neoliberal application of the growth imaginary to urban space. These are the documentaries *Sobre ruedas: el sueño del automóvil* (Keep It Rolling: The Dream of the Automobile, 2011), directed by Óscar Clemente, *Mercado de futuros* (Futures Market, 2011) by Mercedes Álvarez, and the experimental movie *Gente en sitios* (People in Places, 2013) by Juan Cavestany.<sup>42</sup> It seems to me that these films do not merely criticize the neoliberal management of the crisis, but the urban growth paradigm itself. Spanish literary and cultural production and criticism surrounding

<sup>42</sup> Óscar Clemente, dir., *Sobre ruedas: el sueño del automóvil* (Seville: Labalanza, 2011); Mercedes Álvarez, dir., *Mercado de futuros*, DVD (Barcelona: Cameo, 2011); Juan Cavestany, dir., *Gente en sitios*, DVD (Barcelona: Cameo, 2013).

the financial crisis tends to focus on the social damage and human suffering it creates, rather than the unsustainable linear urban metabolism and 'petroculture' behind it. In the case of Spain, this focus on urban metabolism is especially relevant, since the nation's rapid passage from a rural economy to a neoliberal one involved a huge geographical transformation led by the proliferation of unsustainable agriculture, disastrous touristic and residential coastal constructions, and transportation infrastructures excessive even by Western European standards.

My goal here is not to catalogue the explicit environmental issues in the chosen films, but to understand how they reveal the socioecological shortcomings of the neoliberal urban model and how they articulate the resultant symbolic and material consequences in order to challenge the growth imaginary. Ecocinema critics generally agree, as noted by Stephen Rust, Salma Monani, and Sean Cubitt in *Ecocinema Theory and Practice*, that:

all cinema is unequivocally culturally *and* materially embedded ... that the dominant, consumerist modus operandi often suggests a troubled state of affairs not only in human interactions but also with the nonhuman world ... and that *all* films present productive ecocritical exploration and careful analysis can unearth engaging and intriguing perspectives on cinema's various relationships with the world around us.<sup>43</sup>

*Sobre ruedas* exposes the unsustainable inefficiencies and socioecological pathologies generated by the massive spread of individual vehicles, as well as the energy-dependent urban model and the forced, futile mobility they provoked. Ivan Illich, one of the preferred philosophers of the degrowth movement, seems to be a source of inspiration for this documentary. Back in the early 1970s, Illich stated in his book *Tools of Conviviality* that beyond a certain threshold, when some modern tools (like the individual vehicle) continue growing in importance and efficiency, they stop serving their originally intended social purpose and become counterproductive, enslaving humans rather than helping them. At that point, the tools no longer enhance human autonomy or creativity and become impossible to control democratically; they become an end in themselves by structuring human relations and institutions to make societies dependent on the tools and the experts who manage and regulate them. The result of the proliferation of these non-convivial tools (for example, modern and

43 Stephen Rust, Salma Monani, and Sean Cubitt, 'Introduction: Cuts to Dissolves—Defining and Situating Ecocinema Studies', in *Ecocinema Theory and Practice*, ed. Stephen Rust, Salma Monani, and Sean Cubitt (New York: Routledge, 2013), 3.

institutionalized education, medicine, and modes of transportation) is a technocratic and fossil fuel-dependent society facing social fragmentation, structural dysfunctionality, and ecological collapse. Cars are one example of what Illich calls ‘radical monopoly’, that is, ‘when one industrial production process exercises an exclusive control over the satisfaction of a pressing need, and excludes nonindustrial activities from competition ... Cars can thus monopolize traffic. They can shape a city in their image’.<sup>44</sup> Cars and the infrastructures that support them exclude other nonindustrial means of mobility (walking, biking) by creating distances (urban sprawl) that make it impractical or impossible to meet daily needs without an automobile. Because modern cities segregate urban functional spaces (housing, marketplace, working areas, entertainment venues, and social spaces), a car becomes necessary to compensate for the loss of multifunctional urban spaces.

*Sobre ruedas* also reveals the connection between the history of the car and the rise of productivist and consumerist culture. The documentary, which aims to be shocking yet pedagogically sound, combines numerous styles and formats to create a varied rhythm that captures the attention of the audience. It interweaves graphics and cartoons, background music, data charts, fragments of old documentaries and advertising, footage of Iberian urban environments dominated by vehicles and concrete, and extracts from interviews in which researchers and activists talk about the social and ecological downsides of cars and the urban model they support. The informed interventions of the interviewees and the disturbing facts they share contrast with the playful tone of the graphics and the sense of parody that the old documentaries and advertising generate. *Sobre ruedas* ends with guidelines on how to transition to a desirable and sustainable urban model designed for the convenience of humans rather than automobiles.

By showing how the infrastructures of petromodernity have (materially and symbolically) evolved in toxic ways, the documentary reveals the hidden energy regime behind the infrastructures that make humans’ love affair with individual vehicles possible. It shines a bright light on the manufactured cultural associations that tie the automobile to progress, democracy, sexual desire, modern identity, and individual freedom. Stephanie LeMenager, in *Living Oil: Petroleum Culture in the American Century*, confronts the representational problems of ‘materializing the ecologies of modernity’, that is, mapping how the current pattern of ‘modern living indebted to petroleum can have persistent damaging effects’.<sup>45</sup> ‘Energy

44 Illich, *Tools of Conviviality*, 65–66.

45 Stephanie LeMenager, *Living Oil: Petroleum Culture in the American Century* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 184, 183.

systems are shot through with largely unexamined cultural values, with ethical and ecological consequences'.<sup>46</sup> The petroleum culture impregnates every aspect of our urban daily lives, since 'oil itself is a medium that fundamentally supports all modern media forms concerned with what counts as culture ... [and] mediates our relationship, as humans, to other humans, to other life, and to things'.<sup>47</sup> The key question is how to craft 'counter-narratives to the petroculture' and its pervasive 'petroleum aesthetics' that permeate the dominant cultural imagination, and how to liberate ourselves from our destructive affective attachment to 'this profoundly unsustainable and charismatic energy system'.<sup>48</sup> *Sobre ruedas* provides an effective counter-narrative by showing both the false promises that the individual vehicle embodies and the cruel optimism that our attachment to petroculture entails. The documentary enumerates (through voice-overs and interviews) the increasing and ever more demanding sacrifices and losses we incur—both as individuals and as societies—to preserve our toxic attachment to cars and the oil energy regime. To illustrate the absurdity and futility of maintaining this attachment, the documentary notes some of the disturbing consequences that followed the massive introduction of individual cars: the disappearance of unaccompanied children and seniors from the streets, the segregation of urban space and its functions, the proliferation of parking lots and roads at the expense of green public areas, and the elimination of noncommodified spaces for social encounters, to name a few examples.

The film repeatedly uses the metaphor of the car as a 'devourer of space', and provides several illustrations of the expansive metabolism of car culture by pointing to its intensive materiality. A voice-over states that if all existing cars were placed in a line, it would circle the Earth 100 times; on another occasion, the narrator points out that the European highway system covers over 40,000 square kilometers, the equivalent of paving the surface of Switzerland with concrete. These statements are accompanied by animations that depict these disturbing facts with dark humor. A further example of petroculture's disproportionate human appropriation of net primary productivity is provided when the documentary attacks the shortcomings of the urban sprawl model by pointing out that it is an insatiable eater of space and disrupter of the geography, dependent on its continual appropriation of more and more territory and its biomass: an urban growth machine.

46 LeMenager, *Living Oil*, 4.

47 LeMenager, *Living Oil*, 6.

48 LeMenager, *Living Oil*, 195, 11.

Another effective metaphor used to visualize the expanding nature of this urban metabolism is that of an ‘expanding bomb that multiplies the space’ needed in order to manage our daily activities. The film shows how a stereotypical four-member Spanish family (the Pérez) living in the suburbs travels 24,140 kilometers every three months (the distance that Marco Polo traveled during his entire life!), just to carry out their daily routines within the city limits. Urban geography, as pointed out by philosopher Santiago Alba Rico, is divided into two categories: squares—spaces where people meet and interact—and corridors of transit. In modern cities, we spend more of our life in the corridors than in spaces for human encounter. But a democratic society needs plazas, as the 15-M movement reminds us through its reclamation of public spaces for politics. María Cifuentes, an urban architect interviewed for the film, states that Spanish cities devote an average of 62 percent of their space to the car, a machine that remains parked for 96 percent of its life. This results in a huge privatization of public space, as noted by the urban geographer David Harvey, who believes that ‘streets are ultimately public spaces, and ... everyone in the community should have equal right to space within them, irrespective of whether they are in a car’.<sup>49</sup> It is unfair that a citizen who cannot afford or does not want a car is unable to use 62 percent of the city. To be able to fully access the urban space of Petropolis, fossil fuel needs to be bought and burned.

*Sobre ruedas* draws explicit connections between our unsustainable energy regime and the automotive petroculture. The individual car paradigm is embedded in an economic growth imaginary that does not recognize material limits to the endlessly expansive tendency of consumerist culture. Ironically it is a dominant imaginary that is impossible to universalize, because the more it succeeds, the more rapidly it diminishes its own possibilities for expansion due to energy and material peaks, entropy, and ecological devastation. The petroculture of linear growth is headed for a dead end because it is biophysically impossible to carry this urban model into the future. *Sobre ruedas* breaks with this dominant imaginary by taking all the positive symbols associated with it and exposing their destructive downsides. The film achieves, in some respects, what Stephen Rust claims that ecocinema concerned with climate change can accomplish, that is, to compel audiences ‘to interpret historical images of oil, cars, and their related military-industrial complexes through the lens of global environmental risk’.<sup>50</sup> In the documentary, ecological economist Óscar Carpintero explains

49 Harvey, *Rebel Cities*, 97.

50 Stephen Rust, ‘Hollywood and Climate Change’, in *Ecocinema Theory and Practice*, ed. Stephen Rust, Salma Monani, and Sean Cubitt (New York: Routledge, 2013), 194.

how embracing the individual car as the default for the urban model is what is known in decision theory as feeding the idiocy: namely, adopting as a default the option with the greatest economic, social, and environmental costs. The problem is that this idiocy is the logic of capitalism itself and is now so ingrained in our economic, political, and cultural institutions that it is difficult not to see it as something given and unchangeable, instead of the result of historically emergent social constructions. *Sobre ruedas*, in conclusion, contributes to undermine and displace the dominant imaginary.

*Mercado de futuros* by Mercedes Álvarez also investigates the ills of neoliberal urbanization, but uses a very different cinematic strategy than *Sobre ruedas*. In this documentary the camera infiltrates the professional spaces of the principal engineers of the real estate and mortgage crisis—real estate agencies and fairs, the offices of financial speculators, and marketing and entrepreneurial conferences—and puts their spectacular paraphernalia of empty formulaic language, manufactured images, and fake scenarios on display. This close look at the urban growth ‘experts’ is both comical and infuriating to an audience that is immersed in the ongoing temporality of the financial crisis. The false promises of the dominant imaginary contrast dramatically with its dysfunctional and all too real urban metabolisms. Several sequences illustrate the proliferation of excessive traffic and concrete, abandoned construction sites, urban waste, and so on. The overall pace of the film is deliberately slow, enabling the audience to reflect on individual scenes and draw connections between multiple sequences. There are often long static shots of a given space or group of objects, highlighting their materiality. Human characters enter and exit the frame, but the camera remains still and does not prioritize their presence by focusing on them or following them. Some takes are unusually long and the film’s rhythm is determined by the intensity of the characters’ activity rather than by the frequency of the cuts. The overall slowness is subversive, since it enacts what the accelerated neoliberal temporality prevents us from doing: taking time to think, remember, evaluate, and decide whether an acceleration of our urban metabolism is socially desirable and ecologically viable. The film demonstrates that if people are granted the time to see, reflect, and make connections about the irrationality of neoliberal urbanization, they will do so on their own, without the need for complex technical explanations by self-proclaimed experts.

One of the most interesting things about *Mercado de futuros* is the absence of an authoritative narrator. The disembodied voice-over that is heard on a few occasions is more philosophical and lyrical than pedagogical and explicit. It deals with the art of memory and how our society may be losing it while the material world preserves it. Material transformations and changes

in urban architecture are recorded memories. Objects have a persistent agency and they refuse to forget. One thinks of the massive geohistorical record imprinted on the biosphere during the Anthropocene that could be read by future archeologists. The Anthropocene, or 'Anthrobscene', as Jussi Parikka prefers to call it, is geological memory that 'describes the effects of the human species and its scientific-technological desires on the planet'.<sup>51</sup> As a result, the lack of historical memory in growth-oriented societies cannot prevent the Earth from recording the socioecological transformation brought about by capitalism's metabolic rift. Certainly, the ecological crisis and the mortgage crisis are nothing but a crisis of memory. Societies dominated by the growth imaginary quickly forget that 'it can take from 500 to 1,000 years to build an inch of new topsoil', as the Land Institute reminds us,<sup>52</sup> and that neoliberal fantasies can coerce us into killing it quickly with concrete and asphalt in the process of generating an unsustainable urban metabolism that is neither socially necessary nor desirable.

For the majority of the film, the camera allows the diegetic characters to express themselves in their own terms as they perform their professional activities without interference. The camera waits patiently until the growth-oriented fantasies expose themselves in their theatrical, manufactured, hyperrealist artificiality. In some cases, the spell is broken by the characters' regurgitation of nonsensical neoliberal speeches. When these discourses are critically analyzed, they prove to be delusional. The best example of this occurs at a real estate and tourism fair when a realtor talks to a couple of potential customers about a tourist resort in Latin America constructed in a biodiverse region that boasts mangroves. He conceives of the place as 'un derroche de naturaleza' [an excess of nature], as if one could have too much nature and as if humans were not part of the natural world. He recites a litany in praise of ecotourism and indigenous tribes without listening to his interlocutors. He celebrates the 'efecto de acoplarte con la naturaleza ... con aire acondicionado' [effect of coupling oneself with nature ... with air conditioning]. If we analyze his discourse ecocritically, numerous contradictions arise. The more successful these resorts become, the faster they deplete the biodiversity and cultural diversity they intend to commodify, and the more tourists learn to enjoy technologically mediated 'nature', the faster its biodiversity disappears. David Harvey describes the same paradox of the monopoly of rent, namely,

51 Jussi Parikka, *The Anthrobscene* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2014), 1.

52 Land Institute, <https://landinstitute.org/about-us/>.

that the more a commodified place becomes homogeneous and ‘Disneyfied’ (with swimming pools, air-conditioned hotels, corporate commodities, modern transportation infrastructures, etc.), the less unique it is and therefore the less valuable commercially.<sup>53</sup> And there is an ethical dilemma in the monopoly inherent in capitalist dynamics: corporations appropriate the value of ‘the collective symbolic capital to which everybody has, in their own distinctive ways, contributed both now and in the past’ by unfairly appropriating and monopolizing the symbolic and common creation of value by indigenous cultures and their cultural landscapes, while destroying the cultures (and biomes) that coevolved with and gave shape to the native landscape.<sup>54</sup>

*Mercado de futuros* does not provide any explanation of why so many apparently educated and well-dressed people insist on perpetuating discourses that seem to be parodic. In one scene, a realtor trying to sell property takes it for granted that the potential buyer wants to speculate with it, and becomes confused when his client explains that he is looking for a house in which to live. The reaction of the realtor is polite incomprehension. Rather than rethinking his own absurd profession—turning houses into places where most people cannot afford to live—he ends up preaching to the prospective customer about the need to open his mind (meaning, to consider speculating and investing in the mortgage markets which, as the audience knows, exacerbated the ongoing crisis). There are other examples in which characters shamelessly and aggressively talk (they rarely practice active listening) about the economic benefits of urban speculation and futures markets, the wonderful increase in gated communities, and how the capital movements they facilitate navigate and create crisis. All the while they act as if these pursuits did not have massive ethical, ecological, and social implications.

One remarkable sequence begins with a female voice-over and the image of an architectural mock-up. The emphatic voice celebrates a great opportunity to invest in Dubai and its macro-hotels, office buildings, and gigantic malls. Dubai is depicted as ‘the ideal place to live and to work’, and the voice-over swoons that ‘something so beautiful and amazing appears from the desert’. A subsequent scene reveals that the speaker is talking to an apparently persuaded potential investor at a real estate fair. She mentions that Dubai has just opened the biggest shopping mall in the world and is now building one that will be twice as large. She remarks that everything is bigger and better in Dubai, and that in Dubai ‘all dreams

53 Harvey, *Rebel Cities*, 103–112.

54 Harvey, *Rebel Cities*, 105.

come true'. However, the material reality is not compatible with this urban neoliberal fantasy, for Dubai is an extreme example of a Petropolis with an unsustainable linear urban metabolism.<sup>55</sup> The spectacular growth of cities in the Arabian Gulf (a desert) equipped with eccentric engineering and architectonic features (artificial lakes, pharaonic sports facilities and shopping centers, skyscrapers) proceeds without attending to all the elements necessary for livable and sustainable urban spaces: community parks, public schools, squares, and so on. In addition to the social corrosion and lack of social resilience in Dubai and other Arabian Gulf 'growth' cities, these urban models depend on intensive energy input and generate disturbing amounts of waste and pollution; their 'per capita use of fossil fuel—and greenhouse gas emissions—is among the highest in the world'.<sup>56</sup> Furthermore, 'their utter dependence on desalinated water and imported food', both energy-intensive goods, further complicates the future viability of these cities.<sup>57</sup> The more successful these cities are, the faster they deplete the energy upon which their functions depend. The magnificent dreams that the real estate agent celebrates are likely to become a nightmare in the near (post-petroleum) future. *Mercado de futuros* goes on to show disturbing images of the material consequences of these urban atrocities.

The unveiling of neoliberal contradictions in the film is also achieved by the unexpected intrusion of visual elements and the relationships created between seemingly unassociated sequences by the soundtrack. For example, one shot shows a desolate landscape of concrete pavement and benches (a place devoid of vegetation and shade) in which people appear to be listening to the sounds of the sea. Subsequent shots are close-ups of a poster about tourist beach resorts. These resorts are located in Murcia and Alicante, along the overwhelmingly overdeveloped and ecologically depleted Spanish Mediterranean coast. We come to realize that the sea sounds are supplied by a recording accompanying an advertising campaign that is being staged on the periphery of a city near an airport, far from the sea. In the next scene, posters bearing paradisiac images, such as an attractive white heterosexual couple walking on a deserted beach, are paired with a marine soundscape, but the view is suddenly interrupted by workmen passing before the camera. They are building the infrastructure of what seems to be an urban fair promoting tourism, and the noises made by their tools invade the scene. The cacophony of power tools and an exotic view frequently interrupted by mundane elements are a much

55 Girardet, *Creating Regenerative Cities*, 56–59.

56 Girardet, *Creating Regenerative Cities*, 57.

57 Girardet, *Creating Regenerative Cities*, 56.

more realistic representation of what a tourist might expect to find on the overcrowded Mediterranean coast. The most disruptive moment occurs when a door opens in the wooden wall to which the poster is attached and a person walks out of it. This metaleptic moment calls our attention to the artificiality of marketing paraphernalia and how human and nonhuman phenomena alike insist on disturbing neoliberal fictions.

The massive transformation of landscapes generated by the new financial technologies engineered by neoliberal capitalism (including the futures markets to which the film's title refers) results in unnecessary and dysfunctional urban developments, futile transportation infrastructures, and real estate over-construction, accompanied by loss of biodiversity and overall ecological depletion. In this light, the image of the 'successful' people who deliver hyperbolic and empty speeches throughout *Mercado de futuros* suffers a radical shift. Their positive identification with the dominant imaginary, celebrated and admired as a model of economic success, is replaced by a negative association with the mortgage crisis. They are no longer perceived as the entrepreneurial heroes who will grow the economy and generate a trickle-down effect making everyone more prosperous, but as unethical plunderers of the Earth who engineered the financial crisis and promoted dysfunctional urban development. They destroyed not only the wealth generated by communities and ecosystems, but also the conditions necessary for the production of wealth in the future. They committed the crime of ecocide against present and future generations of humans and the nonhuman alike. As David Orr puts it, on our already overstressed planet we cannot define success in capitalist terms, since

the planet does not need more successful people. But it does desperately need more peacemakers, healers, restorers, storytellers, and lovers of every kind. It needs people who live well in their places. It needs people of moral courage willing to join the fight to make the world habitable and humane. And these qualities have little to do with success as our culture has defined it.<sup>58</sup>

The world needs the kind of people who try to heal the metabolic rift by creating a more circular and cyclical urban metabolism. Two examples of such people appear in *Mercado de futuros*.

The two characters are an urban gardener and a scrap dealer. Because they do not contribute to the growth of the GDP, they are marginalized and displaced by the dominant imaginary, although they make a significant difference

<sup>58</sup> David W. Orr, *Earth in Mind: On Education, Environment, and the Human Prospect* (Washington, DC: Island Press, 2004), 12.

to the urban common good. The urban gardener reduces the metabolic rift by growing food in the city (instead of stealing soil nutrients from the countryside) and makes the city a more self-sustainable and breathable place. The scrap dealer reduces the pressure on landfill by repurposing and reintroducing discarded materials into the urban metabolism. Let us take a closer look at these two figures and their film sequences in turn. One scene shows a couple of small food gardens overwhelmingly surrounded and threatened by transportation infrastructures (a railroad, several streets, and a highway). The gardens look like a biotic oasis resisting the tidal wave of abiotic asphalt and iron. The uneasy feeling generated by the scene is intensified by the unpleasant sound of vehicles. All of this contrasts with the tranquility of the gardener as he gathers fruits and vegetables and waters the produce by hand. At one point he sits down and eats some of his fruit. Later, walking slowly, he carries his produce home and, accompanied by a dog, navigates the inconveniences and dangers of roads not designed to be crossed by pedestrians. The gardener resists being swept up by the rapid pace of the logic of growth.

The scrap dealer has a small garage in the *rastro de los Encants* in Barcelona, where people gather to buy and sell used books, secondhand furniture, and other odds and ends. We know his name, Jesús, because another character states it; he is the only character identified by name in the film, which grants him an authentic personality as opposed to the nameless, unauthentic people parroting the dominant imaginary. He sits in front of his garage and relaxedly chats and jokes with whoever stops by. He is unmotivated by the capitalist logic of maximizing economic profit, and he refuses to sell a number of things because they are not easy for him to retrieve. The materials that a consumerist society discards are kept by a person who does not embrace the logic of growth. The gardener and the scrap dealer are the kind of people who are needed to create regenerative cities with circular metabolisms. They resist, materially and symbolically, the accelerated urban model imposed by neoliberal reason. Their attitude is sober and calm; they seem to know that nothing should be considered trash, because all things have agency. Their tranquil personalities and their unhurried movement contrast with the frenzied and inflated body language and speech of the market-oriented characters.

Another significant scene in *Mercado de futuros* focuses on an abandoned and crumbling block of apartments. The desolate setting is suddenly peopled by a group of teenagers gracefully entering the frame. Using the ruins as a space to practice acrobatics, they improvise beautiful shapes with their bodies as they interact with the decaying space. The acrobats are repurposing the neoliberal wasteland in order to create something

beautiful and artistic that does not require any exosomatic energy and does not commodify or privatize the space. For a desirable non-growth-oriented city to emerge from the neoliberal ashes, this kind of creativity in the reappropriation of space is key. As Matthew I. Feinberg and Susan Larson point out in relation to spaces that have been culturally repurposed in Madrid in the wake of the economic crisis, this reinvented ‘use of previously discarded, abandoned or otherwise unused city spaces ... suggest[s] that there are viable urban alternatives to the accumulation strategy of debt-driven financial capital’.<sup>59</sup>

Mercedes Alvarez’s documentary joins the crop of new Spanish films that ‘acknowledge the relations between film-makers and filmed social actors’.<sup>60</sup> As Moreno-Caballud observes in relation to other Spanish documentaries dealing with ‘the issue of urban transformation’, *Mercado de futuros* allows the social actors to perform, ‘questioning the authority of a neutral and disembodied source of knowledge about the world ... The “performative” turn brings back the embodied and subjective positions that classic authoritarian documentaries wanted to erase’.<sup>61</sup>

*Gente en sitios*, directed by Juan Cavestany, is an experimental film comprised of seemingly unrelated short stories set in Spanish urban spaces (often in Madrid). The title’s reference to people in places is ironic, because most of the characters in the film feel out of place, alienated by both the built environment and other people. In fact, most of the characters convey an uneasy sense of disorientation through their behaviors, expressions, and acts of miscommunication. The places where the characters find themselves never encourage positive emotional attachment or meaningful human interaction, but are spaces of dislocation and alienation. Many characters appear to each other as untranslatable, unrecognizable, estranged, and incoherent. There are many instances of rapidly alternating close-ups that show the characters’ facial expressions as they chat without listening to or understanding each other. The uninhabitable neoliberal urban spaces can only produce awkward and disturbing social relations. They do not foster conviviality, empathy, reciprocity, and communication, but rather aggression, competition, fear, and social fragmentation. Constant tension is the norm. In one of the sequences, Juan Carlos Monedero, an influential social and political activist linked to Podemos who signed the ‘Última llamada’ (Last

59 Feinberg and Larson, ‘Cultivating the Square’.

60 Luis Moreno-Caballud, ‘Looking Amid the Rubble: New Spanish Documentary Film and the Residues of Urban Transformation (Joaquim Jordá and José Luis Guerin)’, *Studies in Spanish & Latin American Cinemas* 11, no. 1 (2014): 62.

61 Moreno-Caballud, ‘Looking Amid the Rubble’, 63.

Call) manifesto mentioned in Chapter 1, delivers a philosophical speech from inside a taxi. He claims that a decent life is one in which a person can develop a life without damaging others, but that just the opposite is true in modern society. Here individualism, consumerism, and competition are society's guiding behavioral principles.

One sentence that is repeated several times is key to understanding the film as an expression of a pathological linear urban metabolism: 'Antes, todo esto era campo' [Before, all this was countryside]. This expression is well known to Spaniards, as it was a common utterance during the last decades of rapid urbanization. By highlighting this phrase, the film forces the audience to think more deeply about it, and a new meaning emerges. Usually, the sentence does not carry negative connotations; it crops up in everyday conversations as a formulaic, superficial remark, like an observation about the weather, and does not allude to a critical or controversial issue that might trigger an urban planning debate. But following the real estate and mortgage crisis in Spain, the phrase sounds much more problematic. The same is true of conversations about the weather in the context of rapid anthropogenic global warming. Language is never innocent. By moving a casual reference to the countryside to the foreground, the film obliges us to interpret it as a subtle critique of neoliberal urban metabolism and its socioecological downsides. The importance of the phrase as a unifying motif in *Gente en sitios* is evident: it even appears on the DVD packaging in capital letters, competing with the actual title of the film.

In one sequence, a character is discussing possible titles for a novel and 'Antes, todo esto era campo' is one of the preferred options, suggesting that the title of the film itself, *Gente en sitios*, might be replaced by *Antes, Todo Esto Era Campo*. The places where people are now used to be countryside; putting people in modern urban places requires erasing the countryside. Unfortunately, these modern spaces are socioecologically depleting spaces where people live miserable and alienated lives.

The phrase appears for the second time in a sequence in which a middle-aged man with a backpack (played by Santiago Segura) is looking for something in a store full of colorful plastic objects—low-quality items made mostly in China. He looks nervous and suspicious as he holds a hammer that he eventually decides to purchase. Later on he appears in the rear seat of a vehicle, carpooling with other people. One character tries to engage him in small talk, recounting how well he himself navigated the crisis due to the fact that he works for a firm unaffected by the recession, which sells clothing for dogs. In the course of his monologue he remarks, 'Antes, todo esto era campo'. The increasingly disconcerted man in the rear seat, whose gestures suggest that he is about to use the hammer to silence his

talkative travel companion, replies ‘¿Qué?’ to express his growing confusion. When the salesman repeats his sentence, the nervous man demands that the car stop at a nearby gas station and he jumps out. Several short shots and a rapidly moving camera indicate the character’s disorientation as he finds himself in a gas station surrounded by noisy freeways. Again, the unpleasant urban space is perceived psychosomatically by the characters. A pathological space produces pathological societies and vice versa. As Ivan Illich and Henri Lefebvre understood well, tools and environments built by humans are not unidirectional transformations of the nonhuman world by human agency. Rather, they transform and mold humans in turn. It is a codetermined process.

Over the course of *Gente en sitios*, ‘Antes, todo esto era campo’ becomes a statement about the disturbing increase of the ecologically devastating human appropriation of net primary productivity, as the rapidly expanding urban metabolism devours Spanish territory in order to produce the pathological and unlivable places where the people in the movie spend their tormented existences. These places are devoid of green spaces and trees, populated instead by airports, highways, industrial warehouses, parking lots, apartments, gas stations, and so on. The only character whose facial expressions and body language reflect comfort and well-being appears in one of the last sequences of the film. Like the apprehensive passenger with the hammer, she too occupies the rear seat of a car, but she is looking at a tree-filled landscape through the open window—a place that is still countryside. As *Sobre ruedas* points out, it seems that the only way to escape the horrible urban model generated by the rise of the automobile is by driving one of them. A perverse paradox.

As in *Mercado de futuros*, a wise voice emerges from a socially marginalized character, a man (Coque Malla) who is committed to finding a gift in a scrapyard for the person he has been dating. Again, a beautiful act emerges from the waste of consumerist society. While evaluating the gift potential of random parts of dysfunctional cars, the man recognizes that ‘El mundo va mal. Vamos hacia un sinsentido’ [The world is going in the wrong direction. We are heading towards senselessness]—an accurate description of our current direction, as the next section will emphasize.

These three films, produced with small budgets and deploying very different cinematic techniques, clearly expose the socioecological implications of current urban alienation. They all explore, explicitly or implicitly, the unsustainable expansion of neoliberal urban metabolisms in post-2008 Spain and the various drawbacks of the urban growth imaginary.

### 2.2.2. Urban Collapse and Post-Petroleum Futures

The previous section explored a number of urban narratives that depict the Spanish crisis of the current growth model without making projections about the future. The second category of the interpretative typology includes cultural productions that take the growth crisis as a given and speculate on the consequences of adhering to the current dominant imaginary and maintaining its metabolic dysfunctions into the future. As is widely recognized by cultural scholars, science fiction provides a fruitful venue and creative intellectual laboratory for understanding the present social and ecological situation by extrapolating it into the future. With the help of speculative fiction, we can envision how the dominant imaginary and some of its currently normalized socioecological materializations might determine future developments. In other words, by projecting into the future the planetary urbanization of capital addicted to economic growth, we can examine the traumatic social disruptions that will result from severe energy restrictions and extreme ecological depletion. I will discuss two novels in this section, focusing exclusively on their vision of the socioecological implications of pursuing our current unsustainable linear urban metabolism.<sup>62</sup>

*El peso del corazón* (The Weight of the Heart, 2015), a work of science fiction by Rosa Montero, continues the story of Bruna Husky, the charismatic protagonist of her previous novel, *Lágrimas en la lluvia* (Tears in the Rain, 2011).<sup>63</sup> Both novels are critical dystopias that take place mainly in Madrid (which has been part of the United States of the Earth since 2098) in the year 2109, after an era of devastating global wars and in the context of a chronic social and ecological crisis. Critical dystopias often suggest alternative possibilities, latent within the dystopian grand narrative, for counter-imagining the hegemonic trajectory. In addition to human agents, Montero's future world includes extraterrestrial beings as well as artificially intelligent anthropomorphic androids ('reps') created for commercial and military purposes. These new 'others' force humans to renegotiate human exceptionalism and social identities. They also trigger the emergence of new fundamentalist groups, including human supremacists, that define their identities in aggressive opposition to the new others by translating differences into hierarchies—another iteration of the anthropological machine. Bruna

62 For more examples, see the essay 'Decrecimiento o barbarie: ecocrítica y capitalismo global en la novela futurista española reciente', *Ecozon@: European Journal of Literature, Culture and Environment* 3, no. 2 (2012): 74–92, in which I discuss several Spanish futuristic novels published in 2011 from a degrowth-inspired ecocritical approach.

63 Rosa Montero, *El peso del corazón* (Barcelona: Seix Barral, 2015).

Husky herself is a rep with an existentialist personality. After serving as a combat rep for a few years, she became a private detective and earns a frugal living. In both novels, the crises of the future are amplifications of aspects of the current socioecological degradation resulting from the intensification of neoliberal globalization: worsening environmental issues that have dramatic consequences for daily life; the management, monopoly, and privatization of vital resources by the multinational corporations that caused them to become scarce; the massive increase of environmental injustices in which the people who suffer the most from ecological deterioration are those least responsible for it; and the extreme dehumanization of society. In Montero's future, technocratic management of populations, a hierarchical and uneven social distribution of risks, and technologies that monitor life and bodies are so pervasive that extreme neoliberal biopolitics are the norm.

*El peso del corazón* could be categorized as an environmental thriller, given that the main plot is determined by Bruna Husky's investigation of a corrupt framework embedded in a complex network of geopolitical environmental issues. Many areas of the Earth are classified as 'Zone 0' and are hyper-contaminated. This situation provokes, on the one hand, a rapid deterioration in the health of people who are forced to live in hyper-contaminated spaces if they cannot afford to pay for clean air, and on the other, the corporate privatization and assimilation of breathable areas as living spaces for the wealthy. Living in Zone 0 areas is especially harmful, and even fatal, for children.<sup>64</sup> In El Retiro, the central park of Madrid, there is an 'ecological' area with artificial trees constructed by Texaco-Repsol (a giant energy oligopoly), while the traditional gardens of the park are in terminal decline due to continuous drought.<sup>65</sup> The corporations which in the reader's present have profited most from exacerbating environmental deterioration (while actively obstructing any proposed solutions for climate change) are portrayed in the novel as benefiting disproportionately from chronic catastrophic situations. The narrator explains that for a long time the air was the property of the big energy corporations, which charged a fee for breathing it, but this practice was declared illegal just a few months ago. Unfortunately, that has not solved the environmental justice problem, because the clean areas quickly imposed a residential tax that only the well-off can afford, generating an enforced gentrification.<sup>66</sup>

In the United States of the Earth, the new borders are determined not by nations but by the degree of pollution, and they are maintained by the

64 Montero, *El peso del corazón*, 207.

65 Montero, *El peso del corazón*, 36.

66 Montero, *El peso del corazón*, 13, 259.

gated and militarized limits that separate environmentally unsafe spaces from zones that have been depolluted, which are only accessible for a price. This system results in the technocratic, militarized, and neoliberal management of populations and spaces, as well as extreme segregation based on income (in the next chapter we will discuss how this is already happening). Neoliberal reason is carried to its logical extreme, since the least fortunate—who seem to be the majority of the population—are fully exposed to the worst effects of ecological degradation, generated by the capital accumulation they did not benefit from, and they receive no public support. As Wendy Brown points out, under current neoliberal tendencies, ‘responsibilized individuals are required to provide for themselves in the context of powers and contingencies radically limiting their ability to do so’.<sup>67</sup> Yet it is difficult to justify the claim that children with cancer dwelling in Zone o are responsible for their plight because they have not pulled themselves up by their own bootstraps and have not invested their human capital wisely enough to improve their living conditions. The very expression ‘pulling oneself up by one’s own bootstraps’, fully embraced by the dominant imaginary, is a biophysical impossibility that defies gravity and, as with many neoliberal fantasies, ignores not only physical laws but also the asymmetrical distribution of power, wealth, and privilege, as well as the socioecological contexts in which individuals are inextricably enmeshed.

That the desperate situation in 2109 is the result of continuing the present inertia into the future is made explicit by historical archives included in the novel which describe events familiar to the contemporary reader. This helps to connect the dots between the temporalities. The narrative strategy makes visible the slow violence that Rob Nixon describes as ‘attritional catastrophes that overspill clear boundaries in time and space [and] are marked above all by displacement’.<sup>68</sup> One of the main challenges of holding accountable those who perpetrate slow violence is the difficulty of tracking its multiple and diverse temporalities. Showing how our current lifestyle endangers the health of the children of the future could be a good starting point. Slow violence invites us to redefine displacement, as Nixon argues, for ‘instead of referring solely to the movement of people from their places of belonging, [it] refers rather to the loss of the land and resources beneath them, a loss that leaves communities stranded in a place stripped of the very characteristics that made it inhabitable’.<sup>69</sup> This displacement is currently more intense in the global South but, as the novel warns, it could be the norm everywhere

67 Brown, *Undoing the Demos*, 134.

68 Nixon, *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*, 7.

69 Nixon, *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*, 19.

in the near future if the current dominant imaginary is not challenged and the metabolic rift increases.

The temporal dimension of slow violence is not fully discernible or easily comprehended. One character in *El peso del corazón* expresses this ineffability when talking about an enormous cemetery of nuclear waste: 'Las primeras pinturas rupestres sólo tienen treinta mil años, y la toxicidad de algunos residuos dura tres veces más que eso' [The first cave paintings are only thirty thousand years old, but the toxicity of some nuclear waste lasts three times longer than that].<sup>70</sup> Of course, this violence (not perceived as such by the dominant logic that perpetuates it) affects the more vulnerable members of society disproportionately, as advocates of environmental justice insist, because they are much more exposed to anthropogenic environmental risks and less able to afford to deal with the related problems. However, nobody is immune to a degraded environment. The novel shows how the syndrome of chemical sensitivity has become much more aggravated in the future due to generalized and continuous contact with synthetic chemical substances that alter the human immune system.<sup>71</sup> This disruption of the body's natural defenses also reminds us that, despite capitalist fantasies which claim that human individuals are independent from social and ecological systems, "human" and "environment" can by no means be considered as separate' and therefore we should think of 'human corporeality as trans-corporeality, in which the human is always intermeshed with the more-than-human world ... By emphasizing the movement across bodies, trans-corporeality reveals the interchanges and interconnections between various bodily natures'.<sup>72</sup>

Stacy Alaimo elaborates on the topic of multiple chemical sensitivities in her outstanding book *Bodily Natures: Science, Environment, and the Material Self*. Trans-corporeality, she argues, erodes 'the foundations of human exceptionalism', since things are also agents affecting our bodies rather than just passive objects to be utilized by humans. This material turn 'inspire[s] a trans-corporeal, posthuman environmentalism' that entails a different ethical approach.<sup>73</sup> Significant modifications to environmental conditions always have consequences for human bodies and therefore these alterations need to be considered ethically. However, the neoliberal tendency to ignore the origins of problems, thereby reducing them to nonpoliticized obstacles to be overcome by entrepreneurial individuals

70 Montero, *El peso del corazón*, 330.

71 Montero, *El peso del corazón*, 54.

72 Alaimo, *Bodily Natures*, 2.

73 Alaimo, *Bodily Natures*, 111.

competing in the global market, does just the opposite. The environment, rapidly depleted by market competition, is perceived, if at all, as an irrelevant background independent of human economic dynamics and the system of social reproduction that is damaging it. For example, the disproportionate amount of research on genetics and cancer treatments ‘deflects attention from environmental carcinogens’.<sup>74</sup> The insistence on blaming individual choices, psyches, or genes ‘absolves government, industry, and indeed the entire material/political world from blame’.<sup>75</sup> The fact is that finding an effective way to deal with multiple chemical sensitivities, or with the disturbing proliferation of cancer, could never be an ‘individual matter, but instead would entail a staggeringly thorough overhaul of nearly all military, industrial, manufacturing, agricultural, domestic, and consumer practices’.<sup>76</sup> The many issues related to environmental and public health cannot be solved by individuals targeting symptoms within the context of a growth imaginary that dominates the conditions of material and symbolic reproduction and worsens ecological problems, but rather by a collective transition to a postgrowth society led by a repoliticized culture.

The urban environments of *El peso del corazón* are radically affected by climate change and other ecological issues, but urban planning still follows a growth-oriented blueprint that relies on a linear metabolism. The grossly insufficient ways of dealing with pressing ecological problems are still based on market-oriented logics (reform environmentalism, eco-modernism, eco-efficiency, green capitalism) which only succeed in increasing an already intolerable inequality and securing the power of a global super-oligarchy.<sup>77</sup> Of course, to manage the massive slow violence generated by environmental injustices without changing the dominant imaginary requires extreme biopolitical control<sup>78</sup> and, conversely, the anthropological machine accelerates and multiplies its exclusionary and aggressive distinctions.<sup>79</sup> The main urban lesson is that post-petroleum neoliberal urbanism, the continuation of the logic of growth in a post-peak oil world characterized by scarce energy and a depleted environment, undermines the conditions of possibility for any socially desirable urban society. For that reason, it seems urgent to challenge this predominant urban model before it is too late and to politicize uneven urban metabolic processes, as urban political ecologists recommend: ‘Political ecology attempts to tease out who (or

74 Alaimo, *Bodily Natures*, 105.

75 Alaimo, *Bodily Natures*, 119.

76 Alaimo, *Bodily Natures*, 115.

77 Montero, *El peso del corazón*, 98, 175.

78 Montero, *El peso del corazón*, 12–14, 133.

79 Montero, *El peso del corazón*, 312.

what) gains from and who pays for, who benefits from and who suffers (and in what ways) from particular processes of [urban] metabolic circulatory change'.<sup>80</sup> Montero's novel does a good job of showing the future victims and winners of the ongoing urban metabolism, but by presenting such a trajectory as inevitable, it underplays the possibilities for a more affirmative politicization. Envisioning desirable postgrowth urban imaginaries would be a good starting point for this much-needed politicization, as will be shown later in this chapter.

In recent years, new research combining fields such as artificial intelligence, big data, geographical computation, and urban planning has investigated the potential for using big data to create 'smart cities'. The idea is to use the massive digital data collected by the so-called 'internet of things' (by tracking citizen movements, feelings, transactions, entertainment habits, calories burned, web pages surfed, home energy usage, and so forth) to understand how people are using the city so that the city can respond to such demands accordingly in real time. Some rudimentary versions of this 'smart' city are depicted in *El peso del corazón*, although this theme is developed further in Montero's previous novel. The outcome is less ideal than the one pictured by the supporters of smart cities. Many futuristic novels contradict the techno-optimistic vision behind this kind of research when they contextualize these technologies in a complex social, economic, cultural, and ecological context. This high-tech urban paradigm is highly problematic in a number of ways, because these smart cities molding and adapting to citizens' behavior are also reinforcing, influencing, and channeling such behavior by facilitating it. These technologies can make existing urban processes more efficient, but they question neither the asymmetrical power relations that created them nor the current logic of the urban model itself. This tendency is inherent to techno-managerial reform environmentalism, as discussed in Chapter 1. This mindset often forgets that nothing is neutral, and that the urban adaptations envisioned and programmed into smart city processes—and the identity and power position of those who make these choices—matter immensely. As Montero's novel reveals, if we just make our cities 'smart' so that they effectively and efficiently perpetuate the ongoing urban neoliberal dynamics, the result will be 'stupid' cities reproducing unsustainable urban metabolisms programmed to facilitate and reinforce consumer

80 Nik Heynen, Maria Kaika, and Erik Swyngedouw, 'Urban Political Ecology: Politicizing the Production of Urban Natures', in *In the Nature of Cities: Urban Political Ecology and the Politics of Urban Metabolism*, ed. Nik Heynen, Maria Kaika, and Erik Swyngedouw (New York: Routledge, 2006), 12.

habits, thus exaggerating current power asymmetries and accelerating the ongoing biological annihilation. This could easily generate a vicious circle: the ingrained neoliberal logic disseminated by the dominant imaginary exerts a powerful influence on how people behave in the existing urban spaces in which they coevolve, and if we used these behaviors to model the city, it would further condition people's neoliberal behavior and the city would become a more aberrant urban space of total commodification. Decolonizing the dominant imaginary will become more and more challenging given this vicious circle.

Another problem with this 'smart city' approach also visible in Montero's novel entails the widespread consolidation of urban biopolitics that will not only manage, monitor, and control populations in real time, but also manage the built environment in which they are embedded, thus limiting, manipulating, or channeling future behavior. The cybernetic construction of the smart city will rule out the possibility of political challenges to its regime as citizens are excluded from the debate over what kind of urban model ensures a good life. Under these circumstances, we can assume the exclusion or marginalization of everybody and everything that does not fit into the smart city's processes. The smart neoliberal city, by transforming urban space into a synchronized cybernetic mega-growth machine to facilitate fluid commodity circulation and consumer convenience, leaves no space for urban politics to flourish. This will hinder urban social movements that seek 'to convert public space into a political commons'.<sup>81</sup> In other words, making our current growth-based urban model smarter is not a smart thing to do. While dystopian futuristic novels like *El peso del corazón* provide powerful critiques of the neoliberal urban model and the dominant imaginary of growth, they fail to portray alternative postgrowth urban models that are desirable and sustainable. Narratologists recognize that exposure to certain stories can have effects on readers' political and ethical perspectives, and if a narrative presents a future undesirable urban development as inevitable, it may considerably limit the power of the story to trigger political activism and instead encourage passivity, withdrawal, and resignation. There are thus obvious limitations on the capacity of critical dystopias to envision postgrowth imaginaries and to articulate an effective urban political ecology able to advance a new, emancipatory common sense.

The next example is a brilliant novel by Lara Moreno titled *Por si se va la luz* (In Case the Power is Cut, 2013).<sup>82</sup> This is a post-peak oil or post-petroleum

81 Harvey, *Rebel Cities*, 161.

82 Lara Moreno, *Por si se va la luz* (Barcelona: Lumen, 2013).

narrative set in the near future; unlike Montero's novel, it takes place in a 'nonurban' space (this novel could also be read through the next category of the typology elaborated here). The book portrays an urban-rural relocation, orchestrated by an undefined entity called 'the organization', due to social and ecological issues that intensified after the financial meltdown and transformed modern capitalist cities into precarious and dysfunctional spaces. Like Montero's novel, it is a systemic narrative. The story in *Por si se va la luz* emerges out of the multiple perspectives provided by four autodiegetic narrators (Martín, Nadia, Enrique, and Damián), as well as an extradiegetic alternation of internal and external focus on the seven main characters. The reader is led to assume that the story unfolds a few years ahead of the present moment, given the analeptic references to the financial crisis and to the emergence of social movements that are recognizably incarnations of the 15-M movement.<sup>83</sup> The novel extends the duration of the financial crisis several years into the future, affirming what many people already suspect today, namely, that we are immersed in a systemic crisis.

Nadia, an artist, and Martín, a researcher, are a couple of urban dwellers who move to a semi-abandoned village where they interact with the new environment and its few inhabitants. Living in the village are two long-time locals (Damián and Elena) and a seasoned philosopher (Enrique) who moved there some time ago and now owns the only operational—yet dysfunctional—business, a poorly supplied bar. Later, Ivana, a Russian political activist, and a child in her custody, Zhenia, join the group. Many symptoms of global warming are affecting the regional climate, including extreme drought and unusual ecological changes.<sup>84</sup> Damián, who has spent his whole life living off the land, notices the changes more than anyone else. In the context of the village, the abstract knowledge brought by Nadia and Martín is not functional, while Damián and Elena have practical experience with resilient agricultural methods that can assure survival under current conditions. The complex and irrational neoliberal economy of integrated global markets and financial speculation that has dominated the geopolitics of past decades means nothing in a localized context of bartering and subsistence activities. When meeting material needs is the priority, and water, electricity, and food supplies cannot be taken for granted, 'use' value displaces 'exchange' value. Trade with outsiders takes place irregularly, when a group of gypsies arrives with a van carrying various goods and, occasionally, with passersby. Nadia observes: 'Los porteadores son gitanos, no hay más remedio de que así sea, nos llevan tanta ventaja ahora' [The

83 Moreno, *Por si se va la luz*, 115, 162.

84 Moreno, *Por si se va la luz*, 44–45, 155–156, 188, 232–234, 237, 238, 247.

traders are gypsies, it couldn't be otherwise, they are way ahead of us].<sup>85</sup> Interestingly, traditional peasants and gypsies, representatives of groups whose cultures have been diminished and erased by the imaginary of economic growth, become crucial actors in this postgrowth society. Under the new socioecological conditions, as Nadia puts it, 'Todo ha pasado de moda' [Everything is out of fashion].<sup>86</sup> Where massive inputs of fossil fuel are not available, the local biophysical resources at hand are the only option<sup>87</sup> and outputs are necessarily limited.<sup>88</sup> A more circular metabolism must be created, and thus all organic waste is repurposed as compost to fertilize the soil.<sup>89</sup>

Details about exactly what happened in the cities are not provided, but there are plenty of clues that point to progressive urban decay resulting from vast socioeconomic structures that have become difficult to maintain.<sup>90</sup> The constant injections of energy and materials needed to fuel the urban linear metabolism of Petropolis become less and less available as the global growth machine approaches its biophysical limits. As the politically engaged Spanish nonfiction writer and degrowth promoter Fernández Durán points out, metropolitan spaces are islands of apparent order generating oceans of disorder elsewhere in order to function.<sup>91</sup> One example of this unsustainable metabolic expansion is provided by Martín when he talks about the collapse of the city:

Lo monstruoso. La frivolidad del ensanchamiento, esos kilómetros llenos de construcciones, de pequeñas ciudades que nunca terminaron de existir, bloques simétricos con sus instalaciones de luz y agua, urbanizaciones parásito. Hombres parásito. Virtualidad y desorden ... Ahí empieza el precipicio.<sup>92</sup>

[Monstrosity. The frivolity of sprawl, kilometers full of buildings, full of little cities that never completely existed, symmetric blocks of apartments with their power and water installations, parasitic suburbia. Parasitic men. Virtuality and disorder ... The beginning of the end]

85 Moreno, *Por si se va la luz*, 118.

86 Moreno, *Por si se va la luz*, 120.

87 Moreno, *Por si se va la luz*, 51.

88 Moreno, *Por si se va la luz*, 241–242.

89 Moreno, *Por si se va la luz*, 243.

90 Moreno, *Por si se va la luz*, 41, 73, 101, 102, 104, 114, 115, 116, 162, 205, 242, 248, 290.

91 Fernández Durán, *El antropoceno*, 21.

92 Moreno, *Por si se va la luz*, 101.

The urban-agro-industrial system is completely dependent on a centralized energy regime and a giant infrastructural fabric that disproportionately appropriates biomass and is unsustainable:

Este lugar sigue conectado a un generador, igual que otros miles de lugares en el mundo, tentáculos olvidados donde ya no vive un alma, fábricas inservibles, parques temáticos, centros comerciales, hospitales, seguirán conectados a la máquina aunque nadie encienda los interruptores. Millones de cables recorren la Tierra ... ese gran despliegue de progreso destruido. También las inmensas ciudades parásito que han sido construidas en las faldas de las inmensas ciudades parásito tienen sus conductos de agua y sus cables conectados a la máquina, aunque los edificios estén completamente vacíos.<sup>93</sup>

[This place continues to be connected to the generator, just like a thousand others in the world, forgotten sprawl where nobody lives anymore, useless factories, theme parks, malls, hospitals will still be connected to the machine even if nobody turns on the switches. Millions of cables cover the Earth ... that huge display of progress destroyed. The immense parasitic cities that were constructed on the outskirts of other parasitic cities also have their water conduits and their cables connected to the machine, even though their buildings are completely empty]

The rest is easy to imagine: the price of everything escalates,<sup>94</sup> pets become an unaffordable luxury and the city fills with pestilential abandoned dogs,<sup>95</sup> vital goods are scarce and stores close,<sup>96</sup> basic services are discontinued,<sup>97</sup> energy unreliability becomes the default,<sup>98</sup> and malnutrition, pollution, disease, and generalized chaos proliferate.<sup>99</sup> In summary, 'El mundo construido se convertirá en un campo de concentración' [The man-made world will become a concentration camp].<sup>100</sup>

*Por si se va la luz* challenges the perverse, cannibalistic dominant growth imaginary: 'Hablamos de progreso. Un progreso que se lo ha comido todo'

93 Moreno, *Por si se va la luz*, 104.

94 Moreno, *Por si se va la luz*, 41.

95 Moreno, *Por si se va la luz*, 73.

96 Moreno, *Por si se va la luz*, 114-115.

97 Moreno, *Por si se va la luz*, 116.

98 Moreno, *Por si se va la luz*, 163, 205, 242.

99 Moreno, *Por si se va la luz*, 248.

100 Moreno, *Por si se va la luz*, 104.

[We talk about progress. A progress that has devoured everything].<sup>101</sup> Martín remembers that scientific publications in the academic journals to which he contributed were not read by anyone, since everyone was busy feeding ‘las necesidades irreales de un sistema autodestructivo’ [the unreal necessities generated by a self-destructive system].<sup>102</sup> Continuing along the path laid out by the dominant imaginary of economic growth is likely to lead us to some version of the undesirable forced urban degrowth depicted by the novel. The obvious moral is that degrowing in a system designed to grow is always catastrophic, and thus it is necessary to design a prosperous postcapitalist society that is not addicted to growth. The task is not to weigh the pros and cons of the rural versus the urban, but to ask the question, as I believe the texts discussed in the next section do, What can we do about ‘the epistemological privileging of the city since the 19th century’, which ignores the interdependency between the urban and the nonurban?<sup>103</sup>

In my view, the most interesting aspect of these two critical dystopias is that they challenge audience expectations that catastrophe should unfold in a spectacular and instantaneous fashion. Instead, disaster capitalism is more about an accumulation of chronic problems unfolding at different scales and temporalities, not a big cataclysmic occurrence. In other words, the represented future dystopia is actually already unfolding, and for colonized people it has been here for centuries! In this sense, the experiences of the characters in these novels are not very different from the quotidian phenomenology of many colonized and disenfranchised people in the past and present alike, all victims of the deleterious effects of economic growth and capitalist accumulation by dispossession.

### 2.2.3. Non-Urban Spaces and Neo-Ruralization: Escaping the Urban Growth Machine?

By now it should be clear that the social metabolism of capitalism that radically transforms and produces modern urban and rural spaces (the urban-agro-industrial system, as Ramón Fernández Durán likes to call it)<sup>104</sup> can never be understood by focusing on either the urban or the rural as impermeable, separate entities, but only by considering the flow of materials, energy, bodies, and discourses that circulate through the urban-agro-industrial system. The growing metabolic rift is the result of the unsustainable linear material interchange entailed by the capitalist

101 Moreno, *Por si se va la luz*, 162.

102 Moreno, *Por si se va la luz*, 162.

103 Resina, ‘The Modern Rural’, 8.

104 Fernández Durán, *El antropoceno*.

rural-urban dialectic movement: it is the material manifestation of the planetary urbanization of capital in its differentiated articulations and uneven geographical developments. It is a system in which the urban process depends on massive inputs of energy and vast displacements of inanimate materials as well as biotic beings (including humans), and ends up disrupting planetary ecological cycles, creating refugees, accelerating entropy, and producing unmanageable quantities of waste and pollution. The expansion of this dysfunctional and unsustainable planetary urbanization—since it only functions by undermining its future conditions of possibility—requires the application of a capitalist logic to the food system: namely, implementing industrial agriculture in its different stages as the dominant (institutionally supported and incentivized) mode of food production. Industrial agriculture also leaves the food system addicted to fossil fuels and biotechnologies, resulting in the eradication of traditional peasant cultures and the massive relocation of people.

Today we know we cannot sustain the current global population for much longer using industrial agriculture since it is a system of production that contributes heavily to the ongoing transgression of three planetary boundaries: climate change, biodiversity decline, and the disruption of nitrogen and phosphorous cycles. It is also dependent on a fossil fuel input that will no longer be cheaply and abundantly available in the near future:

One farmer using fossil energy for fuels and fertility, for example, can feed some 75 people. Such numbers, however, conceal the fact that it takes 1.1 calories of fossil fuel to put 1 calorie on the consumer's plate ... Subsistence farmers, operating at far lower 'efficiency' levels, invest 1 calorie to produce 50 calories of food.<sup>105</sup>

In other words, industrial agriculture 'works well if energy is cheap and ecological costs are ignored'.<sup>106</sup> In the context of peak oil and climate change, however, ecological costs are more and more difficult to ignore and the availability of cheap energy is likely not going to last much longer. Furthermore, since industrial food is centrally produced, it depends on long-distance transportation, exorbitant packaging, and refrigeration. All this contributes to the consolidation of macro-corporations that control and monopolize the food supply while undermining democracy worldwide. This centralization also undermines food security and triggers the instability of food prices and access: 'Marx described how capital creates a rupture in the "metabolic interaction" ... that is only intensified by large-scale agriculture,

105 Orr, *Earth in Mind*, 188.

106 Orr, *Earth in Mind*, 188.

long-distance trade, and massive urban growth'.<sup>107</sup> The industrial approach to food obeys a single rule: 'producing ever more quickly and cheaply'.<sup>108</sup> But this growth-oriented agricultural method cannot be sustained much longer since 'we simply cannot organize the agricultural produce market according to the same criteria used for the industrial sector ... Agricultural production cannot be increased indefinitely because the availability of land is not unlimited'.<sup>109</sup> In addition, the industrial agriculture model causes rapid degradation of the topsoil, destroying the conditions necessary for the possibility of agriculture itself.

The rapid transition from traditional rural cultures to industrial agriculture and urban growth in Spain required a vast change in land use and distribution, new economic policies, agrarian reform, new energy policies and infrastructures, and the rapid transformation of traditional landscapes and cultures into operational landscapes to support the planetary urbanization of capital. Such changes do not happen spontaneously, but are orchestrated from above and entail a forced relocation of people and an enormous intensification of ecological degradation. Óscar Carpintero's study of the metabolism of the Spanish economy during the second half of the twentieth century clearly shows that in those years the Spanish economy rapidly increased the material and energy intensity of its activities, significantly affecting ecological systems and grossly overshooting its territorial biocapacity.<sup>110</sup> The role of Franco in the implementation of this capitalist modernization and its dominant imaginary cannot be overlooked, as pointed out by Jo Labanyi and Helen Graham.<sup>111</sup> Moreno-Caballud notes that 'within the broad meaning of "culture" (production and circulation of meaning, ways of life, creation of subjectivity), the capitalist implementation instigated by Francoism undoubtedly implies a complete economic revolution—but it also implies a cultural one'.<sup>112</sup> Following Jesús Izquierdo, Moreno-Caballud explains Francoism's effective 'task of dismantling rural traditional cultures',<sup>113</sup> whose strategy included:

the marginalization and disarticulation of community-based rural cultures; the implementation of a middle-class, individualist, urban,

107 Foster, Clark, and York, *The Ecological Rift*, 77.

108 Hermann Scheer, 'Region Is Reason', in *Slow Food*, ed. Carlo Petrini (White River Junction, VT: Chelsea Green, 2001), 9.

109 Hermann Scheer, 'Region Is Reason', 9.

110 Carpintero, *El metabolismo de la economía española*.

111 Graham and Labanyi, 'Culture and Modernity: The Case of Spain', 16–17.

112 Moreno-Caballud, *Cultures of Anyone*, 41.

113 Moreno-Caballud, *Cultures of Anyone*, 42.

consumerist social model; and finally, a significant part of that implementation, the launch of a whole series of liberal economic policies ... that will establish the foundations of the neoliberal model still to come.<sup>114</sup>

Eugenia Afinoguénova eloquently explains how the slippery concept of 'quality of life' was constructed during late Francoism to justify socially undesirable and environmentally destructive economic policies based on unsustainable growth and the overdevelopment of tourism.<sup>115</sup> Once capitalist growth and quality of life are presented as synonyms, it becomes quite difficult to criticize the former without being accused of opposing the latter. Thus, neither right- nor left-oriented political discourses dare to oppose the suicidal addiction to economic growth once it is equated with 'quality of life' by a vast segment of the population, no matter how wrong and contradictory that association may be. Hence, any radical ecological project is easily marginalized and diminished. The result was a dominant economic and cultural context programmed to embrace without much resistance what Isidro López calls 'consensonomics: the economic ideology of the CT' which has dominated the Spanish social imaginary over the last few decades. According to López, the most effective bait deployed by the cultural authorities to promote mass acceptance of this ideology was to equate it with European integration. Actually, the neoliberalization of Spain was significantly intensified after its entry into the European community.<sup>116</sup> The Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership (TTIP) agreement, which has been under negotiation between the European Union and the United States since 2013, promotes the culmination of the neoliberal project and threatens a corporate-orchestrated disarticulation of what remains in Europe of small and medium-sized farming. This dismantling entails dire socioecological consequences. Research journalist and activist Esther Vivas warns that since the onset of the global financial crisis, the same speculators who provoked the real estate bubble are now generating a food bubble by speculating with the food supply.<sup>117</sup> Extracting capital first by expelling people from their houses and now by taking food from their mouths: this is the culmination of the life-capital conflict excoriated by feminist and ecological economics.

114 Moreno-Caballud, *Cultures of Anyone*, 46.

115 Afinoguénova, 'Tourism and "Quality of Life" at the End of Franco's Dictatorship'.

116 López, 'Consensonomics: la ideología económica en la CT', 84–85.

117 Esther Vivas, 'De la burbuja inmobiliaria, hemos pasado a la burbuja alimentaria', *Esther Vivas*, October 21, 2013, <https://esthervivas.com/2013/10/21/de-la-burbuja-inmobiliaria-hemos-pasado-a-la-burbuja-alimentaria/>.

One of the most rarely challenged pillars of the CT's dominant economic and cultural paradigm is the notion that economic growth driven by capitalist development is the only path to progress and therefore should be society's priority. Whatever economic cultures are incompatible with capitalist modernity—and its intense, unsustainable material regime—are systematically condemned and discarded. If the only way to progress as a modern, normalized European country is through economic growth and capitalist urbanization, all ways of life that do not contribute to it are to be undermined materially and symbolically. Non-market-oriented communitarian ways of life, where the culture of sharing and frugality are the default, are to be disposed of and fragmented, leaving the market as the only way to fulfill the needs previously supplied by the community itself. It is well known that lonely individuals fearing their neighbors in neoliberal urban environments are much more dependent on commodified products than people living in coherent communities. Indeed, if the priority of society is economic growth, a fragmented urban environment full of disempowered, overstressed, fearful individuals is preferable to cohesive and convivial communities. In the dominant semiotic realm, however, the urban is often associated with the desirable, setting the standard for quality of life, and the rural is constructed as its denigrated opposite: capitalist urban growth is taken for granted and equated with progress. Subsistence economies are disallowed and the word 'subsistence' (which means to have the autonomy, as a community, to be able to sustain your own life) becomes a derogatory term. As Amaia Pérez Orozco reminds us, under capitalism, by definition, capital accumulation is a process that is socially guaranteed (on a material, symbolic, and political level) over the reproduction of life.<sup>118</sup> Thus, the maintenance of life is not a social priority and it becomes ignored, feminized, and privatized. Today, planetary life is being annihilated—species are becoming extinct at a rate hundreds of times faster than what was previously the norm—in the intensified conflict between capital and life inherent to capitalism.<sup>119</sup>

Let us explore how some recent cultural manifestations (fiction and nonfiction writings, op-eds, web series, and documentaries) are challenging the dominant imaginary by focusing on the rural-urban metabolic rift from the vantage point of the 'nonurban'. In these cultural productions, crucial nonurban spaces, often ignored by the city-centric dominant imaginary, are moved to the forefront. These spaces—Neil Brenner calls them 'operational landscapes'—where the conflict between capital and life and its slow violence

118 Pérez Orozco, *Subversión feminista de la economía*, 133.

119 Pérez Orozco, *Subversión feminista de la economía*, 181.

are especially virulent, reveal how the metabolism of cities depends on extra-urban spaces that encompass the whole planet. As such, planetary urbanization operationalizes and transforms ‘the entire planet, including terrestrial, subterranean, fluvial, oceanic and atmospheric space, to serve an accelerating, intensifying process of industrial urban development’.<sup>120</sup> These conflicting geographies tend to be completely obliterated—at least in their problematic socioecological aspects—by the dominant urban imaginary. In other words, the applauded urban monuments of industrial and postindustrial modernity come with a huge global socioecological cost (within and without the geography of the city) and, frequently, the more pharaonic and spectacular monuments are, the more disturbing the dimensions of such costs become.

*Distintas formas de mirar el agua* (Different Ways of Looking at Water, 2015), a short choral novel by Julio Llamazares, narrates how a number of family members gather by a reservoir to deposit the ashes of their deceased grandfather, Domingo.<sup>121</sup> The reservoir was one of the many hydraulic projects undertaken by the Franco regime to fuel urbanization, industrialized agricultural irrigation, touristic infrastructures, and economic growth. As a result, Domingo’s hometown was flooded and he and his family were relocated in one of the rapidly sprouting ‘colonization towns’, where they found a mass-designed ‘non-place’ with completely different ecological and agrarian conditions to which their traditional knowledge and practices were not always appropriate. They were forced to abandon a more or less coherent community with a cartography of memories and emotional attachments for a culturally and historically unfamiliar place full of unknown people. This affected not only the life of Domingo, who never overcame a deep and silent nostalgia due to his lost sense of place, but his entire family as well. The novel fictionalizes some of the specific consequences of Franco’s technocratic project in Spain and its authoritarian, biopolitical management of populations. Moreno-Caballud beautifully describes the manifold social and cultural implications of these ‘technical’ decisions:

The technocrat draws the line where the dam will be built: everything that falls on one side will perish under the water. This includes, of course, hunger, endless days of manual labor, patriarchal violence, ecclesiastical control, and other scourges of the countryside. But it also

120 Neil Brenner, *Critique of Urbanization: Selected Essays* (Basel: Birkhäuser, 2017), 200.

121 Julio Llamazares, *Distintas formas de mirar el agua* (Barcelona: Alfaguara, 2015).

includes traditional knowledge, and the many material and symbolic capacities that guaranteed subsistence peasant cultures but would not be considered 'productive'—particularly knowledge and skills associated with the reproduction of life, care, emotional and domestic work, the tasks usually assigned to women in a patriarchy.<sup>122</sup>

The ecological implications of these engineering works, often overlooked, are also enormous.

*Distintas formas de mirar el agua* is a systemic narrative, and the reader reconstructs the story of Domingo's family from the internal monologues of 17 intradiegetic narrators. Each person perceives his or her own circumstances in relation to both the reservoir's meaning and Domingo's life. The different ways of looking at water referred to in the title could be interpreted as different ways of understanding Spanish economic development and the various assessments of its benefits and costs. This polyphonic novel challenges the one-dimensional logic of the CT 'consensus' and its singular view of Spanish capitalist modernization. What is not mentioned by CT supporters is that without a proper debate, there can never be a consensus, but only enforcement, manipulation, propaganda, or marketing. There was never any public discussion about what kind of growth is desirable in Spain: growth of what, for what, for whose benefit, orchestrated by whom, and at what cost? These questions were always excluded from the political menu in Spain both during and after the Franco regime, and simply raising the questions could be viewed as opposing progress and improvement of the quality of life. The testimony of Virginia, Domingo's widow, shows how the expropriation and forced relocation they suffered did not lead to a better quality of life at all.<sup>123</sup> For Teresa, Virginia and Domingo's older daughter, the disappearance of the village and the elimination of its historical geography is sad.<sup>124</sup> Other members of the family, who never experienced life in the village and have no direct emotional memory of it, can maintain a certain distance and either enjoy the aesthetic qualities of the engineered landscape and disdain Domingo's *machismo*, like Teresa's son,<sup>125</sup> or celebrate capitalist modernity as if it were an inextricable teleological progression towards human betterment, as Teresa's daughter does.<sup>126</sup> In both cases, we have an ahistorical and unproblematic explanation of the present reality in line with the CT.

122 Moreno-Caballud, *Cultures of Anyone*, 277.

123 Llamazares, *Distintas formas de mirar el agua*, 11.

124 Llamazares, *Distintas formas de mirar el agua*, 36.

125 Llamazares, *Distintas formas de mirar el agua*, 51, 56.

126 Llamazares, *Distintas formas de mirar el agua*, 65, 67.

José Antonio, Virginia and Domingo's son, introduces more complex historical and cultural nuances. He is vividly aware of how the river's history, measured in geological time, was interrupted by the contingency of the dam,<sup>127</sup> and of how the engineer's hubristic interventions had unintended consequences: alterations to the riverbed and to the course of many people's lives,<sup>128</sup> including the destruction of an ancestral peasant culture, and even change to the climate of the region.<sup>129</sup> José Antonio claims that his parents deserve the respect denied them by the landowners and engineers implicated in their forced relocation.<sup>130</sup> Ironically, Daniel, José Antonio's son, works as an engineer. As one might expect, he justifies his profession, which brings progress and an improved quality of life to unspecified 'inhabitants', dismissing its critics as ignorant and irrational individuals: 'por encima de los sentimientos está la razón. Y papá no es ningún idiota. Sabe que su país necesita obras de ingeniería que favorezcan la vida de sus habitantes. Y que esas obras producen daños' [reason is above feelings. And father is not an idiot. He knows that his country needs engineering works that improve the life of its inhabitants. And that these works cause harm].<sup>131</sup> Of course, this argument is specious, since almost nobody attacks engineering as a practice to be eliminated. Rather, the problem is deciding which kinds of interventions serve the community and which do not. Are the interventions to be determined by the communities affected or imposed from above? What are the specific socioeconomic purposes and interests behind them? Who benefits and who suffers, and is there another way to achieve the same goal that reduces socioecological harm?

Interestingly, it is Alex, Daniel's brother, who raises some of these issues when he mentions that the successors of the people responsible for the dam's construction are still enjoying the benefits derived from it, although they now live in León and Madrid: 'Beneficios que nunca han visto aquellos que, como mis abuelos, sacrificaron todo lo que tenían para que se pudieran empezar a producir' [Benefits never seen by those who, like my grandparents, sacrificed everything they had so that the benefits could start to appear].<sup>132</sup> Alex, who is much more empathetic than his brother towards other people's suffering and more sensitive to environmental injustices, states: 'El progreso económico no lo justifica todo' [Economic progress does

127 Llamazares, *Distintas formas de mirar el agua*, 73, 77.

128 Llamazares, *Distintas formas de mirar el agua*, 76, 77.

129 Llamazares, *Distintas formas de mirar el agua*, 79, 133.

130 Llamazares, *Distintas formas de mirar el agua*, 80.

131 Llamazares, *Distintas formas de mirar el agua*, 97.

132 Llamazares, *Distintas formas de mirar el agua*, 115–116.

not justify everything].<sup>133</sup> He also notes the rotten smell released by the stagnant water of the reservoir,<sup>134</sup> which is a symptom of some of the many ecological problems associated with it. But it is another son of Domingo and Virginia, Agustín, considered by some members of the family to be of little intelligence, who displays the deepest posthumanist ethics. He describes how many people see the water as a mere resource to be utilized, and therefore mistreat it, but he has learned from his father to see the water with emotion and respect, and to feel pain when others disrespect it.<sup>135</sup>

Llamazares's novel focuses on one of the many nonurban spaces that have been operationalized by the urban linear metabolism and its energy-devouring regime. But it does so not through the usual celebration of human ingenuity and its techno-scientific control, associated with these spaces by the dominant imaginary, but a multiperspectival narrative that includes many heterogeneous and intergenerational voices contesting the celebratory paradigm of growth—voices that, in this novel at least, are emitted at the same frequency as the omnipresent voices that promote modern consumerist societies through the obdurate repetition of prefabricated messages. The dominant imaginary of urban growth can only achieve a celebratory rhetoric by erasing memory, as Llamazares's novel shows (the same conclusion is extracted from the ecocritical interpretation of *Mercado de futuros*). As one character points out, old people loyal to their memories are perceived with uneasiness in such conflicting geographies, 'porque recordaban lo que los demás no saben o ignoraban voluntariamente' [because they remembered that which others either do not know or voluntarily ignore].<sup>136</sup> As Helen Graham and Antonio Sánchez rightly assert, referring to the many government-sponsored and internationally visible macro-events in Spain during 1992, 'these popular celebrations of Spain's new status tended to neglect the past and glorify the present. Indeed this seemed to be part of an official attempt to represent Spain's new, "modern", democratic national identity as if it were built on a *tabula rasa*', thus avoiding confrontations and historically unresolved issues.<sup>137</sup> In Spain, the self-congratulation accompanying these devastating movements of the 'urban growth machine', which David Harvey describes in *Rebel Cities* (following the lead of John Logan and Harvey Molotch), avoids the fact that this process not only 'entails the

133 Llamazares, *Distintas formas de mirar el agua*, 117.

134 Llamazares, *Distintas formas de mirar el agua*, 120.

135 Llamazares, *Distintas formas de mirar el agua*, 182.

136 Llamazares, *Distintas formas de mirar el agua*, 129.

137 Helen Graham and Antonio Sánchez, 'The Politics of 1992', in *Spanish Cultural Studies: An Introduction*, ed. Helen Graham and Jo Labanyi (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 406.

dispossession of the urban masses of any right to the city whatsoever',<sup>138</sup> but also the marginalization and dissolution of any other alternative—including nonurban—ways of relating to the territory that do not accelerate the process of planetary urbanization.

The extinction of these ways of life and their memories—parallel to the massive loss of biodiversity, since the loss of cultural and biological diversity go hand in hand—also marks the loss of ancestral knowledge, technologies, and skills perfected over centuries to optimize the use of limited resources and to facilitate the survival of the community within specific ecologies. As noted in the previous section, these bodies of knowledge could mean survival in a future in which, most likely, ecological degradation and energy restrictions will be the default. Cultures of survival are mostly found in nonurban (in neoliberal times also infra-urban) spaces and have experienced constant attrition marked by the material and symbolic dispossession orchestrated by different powers since the 1950s (from Franco's agricultural rationalization to the European Union agrarian laws and transnational trade agreements). However, the past few years have witnessed an increased revalorization of these cultural modes, prompted by a sense of urgency that stems from both the situation of these cultures at the edge of extinction and the pressing social and environmental issues brought about by the global financial crisis.

As pointed out by Joan Ramon Resina in his introduction to the edited volume *The New Ruralism: An Epistemology of Transformed Space*, 'the new ruralism is not synonymous with the late nineteen sixties movement of "return to nature" ... [but rather] the return of a social consciousness of the dignity and importance of the non-urban'.<sup>139</sup> There is currently a wave of projects of all kinds—including collections of rural memories and traditions published in book form or online, regional websites, and documentaries—devoted to conserving for posterity specific local cultural knowledge throughout the Iberian territory. Unfortunately, certain practices cannot be preserved in a textual, visual, or digital format for future use, since they depend on specific socioecological conditions that have vanished. Nevertheless, these works show a deep respect for cultures marginalized by the dominant imaginary, and could be evidence of an increasing suspicion that the paradigm of growth and capitalist development is not really functional in a limited biosphere and may indeed be on the verge of collapse.

138 Harvey, *Rebel Cities*, 22.

139 Joan Ramon Resina, 'The Modern Rural', in *The New Ruralism: An Epistemology of Transformed Space*, ed. Joan Ramon Resina and William Viestenz (Madrid: Iberoamericana/Vervuert, 2012), 8.

If, as Moreno-Caballud suggests, ‘traditional knowledge is denied the very status of *being* knowledge’ through the usual mechanism—‘the negation of intelligence in those who are dedicated to ensuring the reproduction of material life, and the construction of a monopoly on authorized knowledge’—what does it mean that more and more people are now searching for meaning in *non-authorized* sources of knowledge?<sup>140</sup> Is this another indication of the current fracture of the growth imaginary? There are two recent books that I consider important in this regard: *La voz de los sabios* (The Voice of the Elders, 2013) by Elena García Quevedo, and *Palabras mayores: un viaje por la memoria rural* (Older Words: A Journey through the Rural Memory, 2015) by Emilio Gancedo.<sup>141</sup> Both of these are based on conversations with elders in which the writers truly listen; they are open to learning from and being transformed by the interaction. Both books present testimonies that rarely appear on the mainstream media radar, since they recount livelihoods and cosmovisions that do not match the modern capitalist agenda. Frequently these forgotten voices offer wise, humble, and complex interpretations of reality in ways that contrast with the oversimplified and arrogant verbiage generated by the dominant imaginary.

Gancedo’s book is a delightfully written work that brings together diverse oral traditions, ancestral memories, and philosophies of life from Iberian rural geography. The author allows people to express themselves in their own terms, always respecting the pace of their storytelling and the flow of their memories. He traveled to remote villages to converse with elders who have experienced a variety of ways of being in the world. Gancedo talks little, because he prefers to listen. In many respects, these meaningful voices are those that have been swept away by the rapid advances of Spanish consumerist culture and its associated values. Many of these people embrace a notion of time that does not coincide with the hectic, accelerated pace of capital accumulation and spectacular media. For them, seasonal changes and communal gatherings mark the rhythms of their life and labor.

*Palabras mayores* is rich in descriptions of *naturecultural* landscapes, which are understood as a socioecological symbiotic coevolution of humans and the nonhuman. The agency of the nonhuman is never disregarded. This does not imply that nonurban spaces are more natural and less cultural than cities, but rather that in such spaces the inextricable socioecological interdependence

140 Moreno-Caballud, *Cultures of Anyone*, 36.

141 Elena García Quevedo, *La voz de los sabios* (Barcelona: Ediciones Luciérnaga, 2013); Emilio Gancedo, *Palabras mayores: un viaje por la memoria rural* (Logroño: Pepitas de calabaza, 2015).

of humans and their environment is not intentionally hidden and negated by unsustainable fossil fuel depletion and their petromodern fantasies. The linguistic diversity displayed in the book is significant, as each elder speaks with a different regional dialect full of distinct nuances and expressions. Some have a telluric lexicon that vividly describes the changing aspects of their environment with remarkable precision. The global, rapid modern shift from diverse languages to fewer linguistic variations parallels the ongoing extinction of cultures and species. This is not mere coincidence. If everything is a commodity or resource to fuel the capitalist economy, only the language of neoclassical economics, the vocabulary of marketing, and entrepreneurial and corporational stories need to be developed and disseminated. Other variations are nothing but an obstacle to economic growth and can be exterminated without remorse, even if they are, in fact, the very stories 'we will need ... to survive by'.<sup>142</sup> That is why the stories that Gancedo gathers are so important, because they challenge the monologic of the dominant imaginary not only philosophically and practically, but also linguistically. Many times Gancedo notes his interlocutors' refusal to give up their linguistic heritage: 'Lucha este hombre alto, y con todas sus fuerzas, para evitar la extinción definitiva de las palabras que definieron su mundo' [This tall man fights with all his might to prevent the definitive extinction of the words that defined his world].<sup>143</sup>

Many of the elders remember frugal living conditions and hard manual labor, but they also remember a widespread sense of community, solidarity, and conviviality that no longer exists.<sup>144</sup> A generalized good life is never possible (in any geography or for any culture) under a regime of exploitation and inequality (no matter whether we are talking of a rural aristocracy or an urban capitalist class). 'Inequality is socially corrosive', as Wilkinson and Pickett remind us, and desirable progress implies a system of social reproduction that abolishes all forms of exploitation and inequality.<sup>145</sup> Gancedo's book, through its focus on the elders' memories, offers an embodied and historical document of multiple geographical, demographic, and cultural perspectives in Spain that resisted the trendy exodus to cities. Economic development, which for the dominant imaginary is an unequivocal symptom of progress, is presented with complexity and nuance in Gancedo's book. This resistance to oversimplification is properly summarized by one elder: 'Ni aquello fue todo lo malo, ni esto es todo lo bueno' [neither was

142 Stibbe, *Ecolinguistics*, 183.

143 Gancedo, *Palabras mayores*, 129.

144 Gancedo, *Palabras mayores*, 52, 135, 145, 174.

145 Wilkinson and Pickett, *The Spirit Level*, xiv.

that all bad, nor is this all good].<sup>146</sup> Of course, many of those interviewed appreciate some of the improvements in their physical living conditions—the eradication of some forms of exhausting manual labor, and access to formal educational opportunities—but they also recollect positive aspects that have been lost and values that have been left behind. Ángeles González, for example, is critical of the way in which children are educated today, claiming that we are spoiling them: ‘Por no enseñarles la raíz de las cosas, de dónde vienen los alimentos o cómo se llaman los componentes que engranan la asombrosa máquina del paisaje’ [Because we are not teaching them the root of things, where food comes from or the names of the components that fit together in the awesome machine that is the landscape].<sup>147</sup> The abstract education denounced here entails a loss of understanding and communitarian control as a result of technocratic centralization and faith in a growth-oriented technical system that cannot be sustained. But it would be wise, as says Lines, another of Gancedo’s interlocutors, not to put all one’s eggs in one basket:

Aquí hubo quien dijo: ‘Yo ya tengo luz eléctrica, yo tiro el candil’. Y se pusieron a quitar las cosas antiguas. Pero vamos a ver—se reafirma—¿cómo sabes que no tendremos que volver a lo de antes? Y si se va una noche la luz, ¡habrá que prender el candil otra vez!<sup>148</sup>

[Some people said: ‘I have electric power, I’ll throw away the candle’. And they started removing old things. But let us see—she emphasizes—how do you know that we will not have to get back to what we had before? What if one night the power goes off? In that case, we would have to light the candle again!]

Indeed, if we pay close attention to the world energy situation, it is easy to conclude that, in a not-too-distant future, energy restrictions are likely to become commonplace.

Most of the elders featured in the book are cognizant of the erosion of social cohesion and are sensitive to the environmental deterioration brought about by the changes they have experienced. They feel uneasy about the hubristic cultural attitudes thriving under the auspices of these transformations, which lack any commonsensical precautionary principles. Perhaps because of their intimate understanding of the cycle of nutrients that traditional food production methods involve, many of these elders

146 Gancedo, *Palabras mayores*, 56.

147 Gancedo, *Palabras mayores*, 35.

148 Gancedo, *Palabras mayores*, 48.

express concern about the problematic scale of the changes associated with the linear metabolism of economic growth. There is a clear comprehension of the fact that nothing can grow forever. For example, we find some highly critical statements regarding the irrationality of many agro-industrial practices,<sup>149</sup> complaints about the loss of food sovereignty that the new model entails,<sup>150</sup> and explanations of the integrated virtues of circular agroecological practices that were displaced by modern developments.<sup>151</sup> Currently, industrial agriculture is destroying topsoil at an astonishing rate by grossly simplifying complex ecological systems. Permaculture produces food by doing exactly the opposite, but it is wholly ignored by the dominant imaginary. An ironic comment of a clam fisherman provides a concrete example of the disruption of the cycle of nutrients that the metabolic rift entails:

Desde que salieron las depuradoras, la aportación de materia orgánica al mar ha desaparecido. Sale el agua muy limpia, muy perfecta, sí, pero ... Vamos, que si tú en un campo no echas estiércol, aquello no produce nada. Y en una piscina cristalina no criarás un pez en la vida. Sin materia orgánica desaparecen las especies filtradoras, como son la almeja y el mejillón, que aquí antes llegamos a pescar la almeja cincuenta barcas, ojo. Claro, las lejías, los jabones, los metales pesados, eso no es nada bueno, pero la materia orgánica sí. ¡Banderas azules! ¿Qué es lo que quiere el pueblo? Una bandera azul. Es que cincuenta pescadores comparados con el turismo, amigo ... ¡no son nada!<sup>152</sup>

[Since they installed water treatment plants, the contribution of organic matter to the sea disappeared. Water comes out very clean, perfect, yes, but ... if you do not put manure in a field, it is not going to produce anything. And in a really clean pool you will never grow a fish. Without organic matter the filtration species disappear, like clams and mussels. Here before there use to be fifty of us fishing for clams! Of course, bleach, soaps, heavy metals, are not good at all, but organic matter is. Blue flags! What do people want? A blue flag. Fifty fishermen are nothing in comparison with the tourist industry!]

In relation to the ongoing destruction of soil, another character remarks: ‘Si uno deposita un puñado de semillas sobre un ladrillo, no arraigarán, pero

149 Gancedo, *Palabras mayores*, 37, 78–79, 108–109.

150 Gancedo, *Palabras mayores*, 188, 197, 314.

151 Gancedo, *Palabras mayores*, 71, 78, 189.

152 Gancedo, *Palabras mayores*, 167.

sí lo harán sobre el suelo negro y prieto' [If you put a handful of seeds on a brick, they are not going to establish themselves, but they will in a black, rich soil].<sup>153</sup> The ongoing life-capital conflict ingrained in the dominant imaginary is clearly expressed in the subtext of such sentences.

Some elders remember the circularity of a social metabolism that did not generate waste and was based on a rational and efficient use of resources: 'Antes no había basura' [before there was no garbage],<sup>154</sup> 'no se desperdiciaba nada' [nothing was wasted],<sup>155</sup> 'antes se aprovechaba la paja y se aprovechaba todo' [in the past we used the straw and all],<sup>156</sup> 'todo se aprovechaba y reciclaba' [everything was used and recycled].<sup>157</sup> There are also some complaints about the complex legal obstacles to small rural business that have increased during their lifetimes<sup>158</sup> and become more stringent following integration into the European Community.<sup>159</sup> While some inhabitants from mountainous and inner regions often yearn for the past vibrancy of their communities, island and coastal dwellers have an ambiguous reaction to tourists but explicitly lament the disturbing over-construction and radical transformation of their ancestral geographies.<sup>160</sup>

In a consumerist, unsustainable society, the elderly are seen as—or turned into—problems. The dominant imaginary does not know how to describe them in politically correct terms. In CT Spain, with the exception of rich senior citizens, old people are perceived as undesirable creatures who do not contribute to GDP growth, tend to consume frugally, and rely on pensions that depend on capital that cannot be fully appropriated by the capitalist class (unless the retirement system is privatized, as neoliberal policymakers would prefer). Consider the proposed solutions to the inverted demographic pyramid in Spain, the result of the disproportionate increase in retirees in relation to people of working age: cutting pensions and/or increasing birth rates. The first is socially unsustainable and the second ecologically unviable; neither solves the problem and will only aggravate it in the future. For Gancedo, in contrast, elders are purveyors of priceless knowledge and experience and should be a vital part of the solution to socioenvironmental issues. A fascinating study by Judy Aubel notes an interesting connection between the degree of a society's sustainability

153 Gancedo, *Palabras mayores*, 22.

154 Gancedo, *Palabras mayores*, 324, 329.

155 Gancedo, *Palabras mayores*, 53.

156 Gancedo, *Palabras mayores*, 79.

157 Gancedo, *Palabras mayores*, 305.

158 Gancedo, *Palabras mayores*, 78–79, 108.

159 Gancedo, *Palabras mayores*, 78–79, 196–197, 312–314.

160 Gancedo, *Palabras mayores*, 187, 196, 223.

and its treatment of elders.<sup>161</sup> The less a society appreciates and respects its elders, the less sustainable it becomes. Thus, listening carefully to seniors and considering them full members of society does not mean going backwards, but rather leads to the possibility of a desirable future in which we learn how to live better with less and prepare ourselves for a low-energy society with a circular metabolism. As Lines says: 'What if one night the power goes off? In that case, we would have to light the candle again!'

Some other cultural manifestations seem to be more optimistic in their depiction of a new Iberian ruralism because their characters are motivated not by survival, but by voluntary existential or ideological choices that inspire them to join rural intentional communities. Such is the case with the documentary *La extraña elección* (The Odd Choice, 2015) and the web series *Libres* (The Free Ones).<sup>162</sup> *La extraña elección*, which is associated with a companion TV show and a transmedia collaborative project, declares as its guiding principle, 'Colocamos el pueblo en el centro de todo y analizamos el mundo' [We place the village at the center of everything to analyze the world]. As this motto and the film's title clearly indicate, the project challenges the city-centric dominant imaginary by epistemologically privileging the village. The documentary features the experiences of several people who have chosen to move to the countryside. The locus of enunciation (and source of meaning-making) is, as in Gancedo's book (or the documentary *Desde que el mundo es mundo*),<sup>163</sup> not the city. However important these new rural experiences may be in deeply transforming the lives and thinking of their participants, they nevertheless do not suffice to modify the power relations of global capitalism. A 'new ruralism can only refer to a critical form of disenchantment, or better yet detachment, that challenges modernity's epistemic superiority and culture's alleged dependence on the city's tempo and intensity of exchanges'.<sup>164</sup> In other words, the urban-agro-industrial metabolism cannot be escaped simply by retreating from its urban core since, in the age of planetary urbanization and the Capitalocene, its transformative economic, cultural, political, and ecological processes affect the entire globe. All the planet is now an operational landscape of the growth-oriented urban-industrial complex.

161 Judi Aubel, 'Nuestros mayores: un recurso cultural para promover el desarrollo sostenible', in *La situación del mundo 2010: cambio cultural: del consumismo hacia la sostenibilidad*, trans. Isabel Bermejo and Mar Garzón (Barcelona: Icaria, 2010), 99–108.

162 Carmen Comadrán, dir., *La extraña elección* (2015); Alex Rodrigo, dir., *Libres* (2013).

163 Günter Schwaiger, dir., *Desde que el mundo es mundo* (Since the World is World, 2015).

164 Resina, 'The Modern Rural', 15.

Presently, new rural projects can be easily co-opted, reappropriated, or disarticulated by urban growth dynamics. As Nick Srnicek and Alex Williams have recently pointed out, ‘this form of politics has focused on building bunkers to resist the encroachment of global neoliberalism. In so doing, it has become a politics of defense, incapable of articulating or building a new world’.<sup>165</sup> An online series about rural occupation, *Libres* reflects on the limitations of such politics. Written and directed by Alex Rodrigo, *Libres* presents a group of seven people who have decided to move from the city to the countryside in order to occupy an abandoned house in the rural Aragonese Pyrénées of northern Spain. They have diverse sociocultural backgrounds and personal histories, as revealed in intertwined flashbacks that link the collective present to the recent or remote past in the life of each. Most of them are motivated by a mix of anticapitalistic ideology and the desire to escape the ongoing intensification of neoliberal urban precarity in Spain. The members of the group embrace environmental values—solar power, ecological gardening, and recovering and repurposing existing infrastructure—and try to organize and regulate their social interactions by means of a horizontal and self-managed form of decision-making. The story avoids idealizing rural life or the characters’ solidarity by centering the plot on the many material and convivial challenges faced by the group. The extremely frugal living conditions that the seven experience are sometimes pressing, even though they do not spend the winter months in the village; in fact, given the winter climate typical of that region of Spain, it is unlikely that the group would have made it through the colder months. Furthermore, their insistence on consensus-building is sometimes paralyzing or subject to manipulation by dominant personalities. Eventually, after months of hard work refurbishing the house, they cannot escape the unfair legal system that overtly favors private property and capital accumulation over use value and socioecological improvements, and the group is evicted and sued. Again, the claims made by Srnicek and Williams about the limitations of this form of politics seem accurate:

In seeking the direct and unmediated cancelation of social relations of domination, these movements either tend to ignore the more subtle forms of domination that persist, or else fail to construct persistent political structures able to maintain the new social relations in the long term.<sup>166</sup>

In the case of *Libres*, both criticisms apply.

165 Srnicek and Williams, *Inventing the Future*, 3.

166 Srnicek and Williams, *Inventing the Future*, 27.

Although the new ruralism has evoked some empathic op-eds,<sup>167</sup> which is no small achievement in a corporation-dominated media environment, the truth is that these projects have a marginal impact on regional, national, or global ecologies and politics. Srnicek and Williams call the preference for local, small-scale, and personal solutions a ‘folk politics’ that dominates current political thinking on the left.<sup>168</sup> They claim that ‘there is a preference for the everyday over the structural, valorizing personal experience over systemic thinking ... Given the nature of global capitalism, any postcapitalist project will require an ambitious, abstract, mediated, complex and global approach—one that folk-political approaches are incapable of providing’.<sup>169</sup> In the case of the new ruralism, it seems obvious that prefigurative politics are mainly a symbolic process, for its small, costly, and transient gains pale in comparison with the ongoing surge of legal implementations and supranational trade agreements that disproportionately benefit agro-energy-corporations and the capitalist elite. While a few hundred houses are occupied and a few small ecovillages heroically resist the advance of the growth machine, foreign capital is buying entire towns and private financial interests are acquiring vast forests and land (sometimes previously protected and publicly owned), while rich people are enclosing communal spaces for the sake of their private entertainment. The question remains: could postgrowth imaginaries combine the phenomenological and the structural in politically efficacious ways?

Ursula Heise has made a point very similar to that of Srnicek and Williams in regard to the inadequacy of folk politics *vis-à-vis* environmental ethics. In *Sense of Place and Sense of Planet: The Environmental Imagination of the Global*, Heise claims that the traditional tendency of environmental criticism to focus on the local may not be an effective strategy in the context of a global capitalism where the local is always overrun by transnational and supranational economic and political powers. Heise urges us to develop ‘an ideal of “eco-cosmopolitanism” or environmental world citizenship’ to deal with ‘the increasing connectedness of societies around the world’ and the technological mediations of cultures, economies, and risks.<sup>170</sup> ‘Rather than focusing on the recuperation of a sense of place, environmentalism needs to foster an understanding of how a wide variety of both natural and cultural places and processes are connected and shape each other around the world,

167 E.g., Isabel Martínez, ‘Vivir en comunidad: un fenómeno alternativo que se extiende’, *La Vanguardia*, February 19, 2015, <http://www.lavanguardia.com/vida/20150219/54427385216/vivir-comunidad-fenomeno-alternativo-auge.html>.

168 Srnicek and Williams, *Inventing the Future*, 10.

169 Srnicek and Williams, *Inventing the Future*, 11–12.

170 Heise, *Sense of Place and Sense of Planet*, 10.

and how human impact affects and changes this connectedness'.<sup>171</sup> If the arguments made by Heise and by Srnicek and Williams are considered closely, it seems that an effective political ecology today needs to be more imaginative and less reactive to localized symptoms if it is to envision and enact a systemic transformation of power relations. 'Resistance is futile' or even counterproductive if it is not accompanied by counterhegemonic projects.<sup>172</sup> Politics that do not confront the global, large-scale neoliberal system are 'simply a salve for the problems of capitalism, not an alternative to it'.<sup>173</sup>

Postgrowth and postcapitalist alternatives to the urban growth machine are urgently needed, along with a massive mobilization of new languages, new logics, new imaginative projects, and integral strategies able to move beyond a timid, insufficient reruralization to a regenerative Ecopolis with a circular metabolism where the urban-rural dichotomy becomes obsolete. If cities are acting as destructive terraforming agents, why not turn them into benign metabolisms to enhance diverse socioecological systems? Such a move would entail radically transforming the cultural imaginary, disarticulating what Zygmunt Bauman calls the 'modern power-knowledge complex', and embracing postgrowth counterhegemonic ways of thinking. If socialization in a linear metabolic order produces, normalizes, and self-perpetuates the cultural values of the growth imaginary, perhaps socialization in a circular social metabolism will be able to bring about new cultural modes based on sufficiency, conviviality, and the recognition of limits. In any case, I concur with David Orr that 'it is foolish to think that we can reinhabit rural areas sustainably without also changing the way we inhabit urban areas. Rural prospects mirror those of cities, and one cannot be improved much without improving the other'.<sup>174</sup> Stretching our political imagination is crucial to shrinking the metabolic rift. This will require (among other things) 'stretching our ecological imagination to break down the dichotomy between urban and rural and allow rural things ... into the urban world'.<sup>175</sup> The cultural manifestations included in the following section strive to break down that dichotomy while embracing postgrowth urban imaginaries.

171 Heise, *Sense of Place and Sense of Planet*, 21.

172 Srnicek and Williams, *Inventing the Future*, 46.

173 Srnicek and Williams, *Inventing the Future*, 38–39.

174 Orr, *Earth in Mind*, 199.

175 Orr, *Earth in Mind*, 200.

#### 2.2.4. Postgrowth Urban Imaginaries: Imagining and Performing the Ecopolis

The last section of the typology explores cultural manifestations that not only challenge the urban growth imaginary, but suggest desirable alternatives to it. If pursuing continual growth through the urbanization of capital in an already overstressed biosphere leads to a dead end, a possible alternative could be to design non-growth-oriented cities that can operate without plundering the ecologies in which they are embedded. Because modern global cities are socioecological open systems with a global reach, as Saskia Sassen reminds us, 'Cities will be forced into the frontlines by global warming, energy and water insecurity, and other environmental challenges'.<sup>176</sup> They will quickly feel many of the current consequences of the Anthropocene crises 'because of the often extreme dependence of cities on complex systems'.<sup>177</sup> City leaders will not be able to avoid addressing these problems once they begin to affect urban supplies and living conditions. Cities cannot afford to wait until states or international agreements come to terms with climate change, for it will be too late. Today,

cities are complex systems in their geographies of consumption and waste-production. This complexity makes them essential for the creation of solutions ... Eliminating cities would not necessarily solve the environmental crisis. We need to understand the functioning of, and possibilities for changing, specific systems of power, economic systems, transportation systems and so on, that entail modes of resource use that are environmentally unsound.<sup>178</sup>

Transforming the metabolism of cities, therefore, can have a large-scale systemic socioecological impact (in both urban and nonurban spaces) and even the potential to change structural power relations, especially if alliances and networks of transformative global cities arise. Global alliances and collaborations of these cities with nonurban movements, such as *Via Campesina*, could also significantly turn the tide against neoliberal power. One example is the Climate Alliance of European Cities, uniting 1,700 member municipalities across Europe committed to reducing their carbon emissions and acting in solidarity with the indigenous peoples of the Amazon to protect the rainforests. Unfortunately, to date Barcelona is the only member from the Spanish state. Another example is the recently

<sup>176</sup> Saskia Sassen, 'Cities Are at the Center of Our Environmental Future', *S.A.P.I.E.N.* 2, no. 3 (2010), <https://sapiens.revues.org/948>.

<sup>177</sup> Sassen, 'Cities Are at the Center of Our Environmental Future'.

<sup>178</sup> Sassen, 'Cities Are at the Center of Our Environmental Future'.

constituted Global Parliament of Mayors, a call for cities worldwide to become proactive and collaborate in developing effective urban responses to climate change, migration, and governance.<sup>179</sup> Other relevant city networks include the Compact of Mayors, the Mayors Climate Protection Agreement, the Urban Sustainability Directors Network, the Carbon Neutral Cities Alliance, the C40 Cities Climate Leadership Group, and ICLEI-Local Governments for Sustainability.

Herbert Girardet writes that ‘In the age of climate change and peaking oil supplies, Petropolis is an outmoded model of urbanisation’.<sup>180</sup> During the shift from Petropolises to regenerative cities or Ecopolises, as Girardet recommends, municipalities will be the main actors. In order to minimize future disasters, to create the conditions for a good life, and avoid potential collapse, they must ‘minimize fossil fuel dependency ... reduce their ecological footprint ... reconnect to their local countryside for efficient food supplies ... regenerate regional soils and ecosystems ... and facilitate the creation of new green business and job opportunities’.<sup>181</sup> The main challenges for successfully engaging in this transition are how to navigate the existing ‘rules of economic globalization’ and ‘challenge the perceived financial benefits of it’.<sup>182</sup> Municipal urban policies can have immediate and noticeable consequences for the quality of life of their residents. There are many examples of inspiring cases on different scales, from neighborhoods and small towns to great metropolises, and from very simple and inexpensive changes that generate a spiral of social and ecological benefits to complex legal and technical implementations.<sup>183</sup> These changes share an integral, multifunctional, and systemic approach to city planning (as opposed to the dominant imaginary’s focus on corporate interests, foreign investment, and GDP growth) and are motivated by the daily socioecological needs of their inhabitants, rather than by global market signals or the desire to attract tourists and compete for foreign investment. Ecopolises should be thought of as integral parts of the territory hosting them. Their main objectives, other than becoming functional and pleasant living spaces for their communities, should be to reduce waste (moving towards zero waste and total composting) and to incorporate concepts of industrial ecology, biomimesis, and permaculture in order to think about urban planning as an integrated system. In order for these transitions to have a chance,

179 <http://www.globalparliamentofmayors.org/>.

180 Girardet, *Creating Regenerative Cities*, 96.

181 Girardet, *Creating Regenerative Cities*, 96.

182 Girardet, *Creating Regenerative Cities*, 119–120.

183 A number of examples can be found in Girardet, *Creating Regenerative Cities*, and Agyeman, *Introducing Just Sustainabilities*.

municipalities must not be managed by mainstream neoliberal politicians, but by leaders with socioecological sensibilities who are able to think systemically and capable of gaining massive support from urban social movements, as well as from their emerging citizens' political platforms. Such was the case in Barcelona, Madrid, Cadiz, and A Coruña during the 2015 municipal elections in Spain. Today, 50 Spanish municipalities, including Barcelona, have declared themselves free of the TTIP—the secretly negotiated neoliberal trade agreement designed to serve the interests of large corporations—in order to make their own decisions about crucial issues affecting their territories.

The ongoing struggle of transforming Petropolis into Ecopolis includes a competition between urban models representing opposing worldviews of what a city should be: a farm for economic growth or a space for collectively deciding what a life worth living entails. For the dominant imaginary, a city should facilitate capital accumulation, but from the ecopolitan point of view, the urban model should promote socioecological well-being and a sustainable good life for all. A transition from Petropolis entails, as David Harvey puts it, challenging the capitalist control and production of space that molds the city and its social relations in the image of its ideological desires while appropriating the collectively generated urban symbolic capital. Meaningful municipal debates trigger 'localized questions about whose collective memory, whose aesthetics, and whose benefits are to be prioritized'.<sup>184</sup> Postgrowth urban social movements reclaim what Lefebvre called 'the right to the city', which must 'be construed not as a right to that which already exists, but as a right to rebuild and re-create the city as a socialist body politic in a completely different image—one that eradicates poverty and social inequality, and one that heals the wounds of disastrous environmental degradation'.<sup>185</sup> Since 2008, Spain has seen a great rise in cultural practices and processes that are trying to rebuild and recreate, symbolically and physically, the city as a place where the social reproduction of life, not capital, is collectively prioritized. Thanks to the 15-M movement, 2011 marked the visibility of alternative urban models and a growth in the number of communitarian experiments with urban practices, narratives, and spaces. In spring 2015, *La revista de eldiario.es* published a special issue on municipalism titled *Qué ciudad queremos*. This publication, especially the contributions by Elena Cabrera and Yayo Herrero, focuses on urban metabolisms, socioecological justice, and the need for postgrowth urban models.<sup>186</sup>

184 Harvey, *Rebel Cities*, 106.

185 Harvey, *Rebel Cities*, 138.

186 *Qué ciudad queremos* (Madrid: Roca editorial, 2015).

One example of the new cultural practices that have emerged in Spain is the design of urban projects by Carmen Blasco and Ángeles Souto, based on ephemeral architecture, to improve some areas of Madrid. These projects have proposed inexpensive and effective alternative socioecological solutions to revitalize and regenerate a number of degraded urban spaces in Madrid, namely the Plaza de Jacinto Benavente, the Lago de la Casa de Campo and its environs, and the Parque Lineal Manzanares Sur. The solutions proposed meet four criteria: they conserve pre-existing features of local identity; they do not alter the harmony of the place, they are ephemeral, self-sustained, and ecological installations; and they accomplish the socioecological revitalization of degraded spaces.<sup>187</sup> These three projects propose simple but highly creative ways to make the city a more livable place, as opposed to the neoliberal urban model that has dominated Madrid in past decades, which is obsessed with macro-investments and mega-infrastructures. The ephemeral architectural designs proposed by Blasco and Souto are intended to meet the daily needs of local people while encouraging communitarian interaction in healthy social and environmental urban spaces.

One of the most interesting features of these installations is that they are designed to be highly flexible and easily repurposed by users to match their diverse needs. In other words, the urban space is not forced upon the people, conditioning and limiting their behaviors, but mutates to facilitate new social interactions and functions; the spaces evolve with their users. These installations empower and invite people to reclaim and modify public space as an inclusive place for horizontal encounter and conviviality, where access and interactions among people and the environment are not mediated by commodification and soft pollution. As Blasco and Souto state, their alternative model of urban intervention is versatile, inexpensive, and sustainable, and it fosters citizens' participation in communitarian management. Furthermore, it has the potential to change the perception of urban space and democratize its use.<sup>188</sup> This non-growth-oriented urban model could be implemented at any time to dramatically improve quality of life, since it does not require the city to brand itself and compete for massive investments on the global market.

Similarly, a number of recent street-art interventions in Spain have challenged the urban growth paradigm by exposing its aesthetic, symbolic, and material wrongs and revealing issues that neoliberal rationality strives

187 Carmen Blasco and Ángeles Souto, 'Proyectos efímeros para la mejora de lugares degradados en la escena urbana de Madrid', in *Arte y Ecología*, ed. Tonia Raquejo and José María Parreño (Madrid: UNED, 2015), 308.

188 Blasco and Souto, 'Proyectos efímeros', 339.

to hide. An interesting example is the Guerrilla Gardening project in Madrid,<sup>189</sup> whose mission is to plant gardens in abandoned or neglected public spaces to call attention to issues related to urban political ecology, such as the connection between inadequate land use, social inequality, gentrification, disregard for social well-being, non-commodified beauty, and the environmental degradation endemic in capitalist urbanization. These actions show how small, inexpensive modifications in the urban environment improve the socioecological conditions of all and can be made by anyone. Unfortunately, 'el modelo urbanístico actual premia el ocio consumista y limita el espacio público' [the current urban model rewards consumerist leisure and limits public space], as Pablo Rivas points out in an informative op-ed playfully titled 'El día en que una terraza se comió tu plaza' [The Day a Bar Terrace Ate Your Square].<sup>190</sup> The title refers to the rapid proliferation of private businesses that have taken over public spaces in Spain over the last few years. In many squares, traditional benches near trees where people could meet and chat have been replaced by private *terrazas* where one must pay to sit. During the past few years most cities in Spain have been transformed beyond recognition to serve touristic demands and the interests of the private sector, at the cost of making public urban spaces inaccessible to local residents. Of course, there is resistance to this oppressive urban model, such as the paradigmatic cases of the *Ésta es una plaza* and *El Campo de Cebada* projects in Madrid. These are two examples of locally initiated participatory urbanism studied by Feinberg and Larson to show how 'culturally repurposed spaces ... [can offer] viable urban alternatives to the accumulation strategy of debt-driven financial capital'.<sup>191</sup> Another example of creative resistance is *#femPlaza*, a monthly happening staged in different Barcelona squares to generate communitarian cohesion and conviviality while reclaiming the public space for all to enjoy.<sup>192</sup>

Two noteworthy examples of collaborative platforms that have recently emerged in Madrid with the goal of mapping and promoting citizen-generated initiatives to repurpose the city space are *Plazas P2P: A Southern European Network* and *Vivero de Iniciativas Ciudadanas (VIC)*. *Plazas P2P* promotes citizens' occupation and appropriation of urban spaces for communitarian

189 <http://guerrillagardeningmadrid.blogspot.com/>.

190 Pablo Rivas, 'El día en que una terraza se comió tu plaza', *Diagonal*, June 22, 2015, <https://www.diagonalperiodico.net/libertades/26976-dia-macroterrazza-se-comio-tu-plaza.html>.

191 Feinberg and Larson, 'Cultivating the Square', 136.

192 See Megan Saltzman, 'Las formas de control y la cotidianidad en la ciudad global: *#femPlaza*, una intervención para reclamar el uso abierto del espacio público', *Journal of Contemporary Spanish Literature and Film* 2 (2014–2015): 189–224.

and convivial purposes, while VIC is an open-source platform and collaborative project for rethinking architecture and urbanism. Another interesting platform is Masqueunacasa, whose goal is to promote alternative and participatory forms of collective living. Other emerging architecture collectives, such as ZULOARK and TXP Todo por la praxis, combine horizontal structures, collaborative learning and design, experimental urbanism, and cultural resistance in order to empower citizens to create more liberating urban spaces. Fortunately, many of the newly elected mayors coming from the social movements and political platforms developed after 15-M are joining forces with some of these small communitarian experiments to challenge the neoliberal urban model.

Another example of cultural production that challenges the urban growth imaginary and proposes postgrowth alternatives is a recent graphic novel that explicitly criticizes the addiction to growth inherent in our urban consumerist society. The fragmented and multicentered stories of *Memorias de la tierra* (Memories of Earth, 2012), by Miguel Brieva, are tied together by the conceit that they are the memories of an extraterrestrial alien who visited the Earth long ago (approximately during the years 2009–2012).<sup>193</sup> The strategy of employing the perspective of an outsider to expose the absurdities of our daily habits has been successfully used by many authors, from Voltaire to Cadalso. In this case, the alien reflects on the critical situation of the human species at the moment of her visit, since civilizational collapse is imminent due to the rapid depletion of resources.<sup>194</sup> According to the observer, the vast majority of humans seem to ignore this threat due to a collective delusion. Only a few are aware of the gravity of the situation,<sup>195</sup> and the alien includes selections from actual texts written by contemporary authors to shed light on the pressing problems they foresee. Some of these authors—Yayo Herrero, Amaia Pérez Orozco, Jorge Riechmann, and Ramón Fernández Durán—are degrowth supporters discussed earlier in Chapter 1.

*Memorias de la tierra* comprises nine chapters and an epilogue. Each chapter begins with the alien's description of an aspect of humanity's critical situation. The rest of the chapter, with the exception of one page devoted to the previously mentioned fragments of visionary texts written by humans, then consists of disconnected comic vignettes that were supposedly recorded by the alien during her visit to serve as disturbing parodies of the individual and collective human behaviors that caused the problems referred to at

193 Miguel Brieva, *Memorias de la tierra* (Barcelona: Random House Mondadori, 2012).

194 Brieva, *Memorias de la tierra*, 6.

195 Brieva, *Memorias de la tierra*, 6.

the beginning of the chapter. The first few chapters expose the overriding myths embraced by humanity at that time: the pathological and hubristic linear notion of 'progress' that celebrates material expansion, which in turn depletes the environment that supports human survival; the belief that no alternative exists to an economic system based on capital accumulation and growth; and the idea that individuals cannot do anything to alter this collective madness. The fifth chapter reveals the way in which humans waste their creativity, technological innovation, and storytelling energy on consolidating the myths that support the dominant imaginary. The sixth chapter deals with the systemic and structural violence consistently deployed against the biotic community (humans and nonhumans) to maintain the irrational mandates of mainstream economics. The hierarchical nature of the system and the inequalities it perpetuates is the subject of the seventh chapter. The eighth chapter wonders whether humans will end up changing direction or continue on to their inevitable collapse. And the final chapter reveals possible paths to a socially desirable and ecologically sustainable postgrowth society.

The fragmented aesthetic of *Memorias de la tierra* does not result in a chaotic fluctuation of attention but, on the contrary, serves as a recurring reminder of the systemic crisis of the growth paradigm from different perspectives. The novel's fragments are unified and framed by an overt and explicit critique of the socioenvironmental damage caused by an economic system addicted to growth. Of particular interest here is the last chapter, which envisions a positive urban postgrowth imaginary. The first set of vignettes in this chapter, 'Saludos desde el futuro' (Greetings from the Future), features a middle-aged man speaking in 2136 with a very relaxed attitude about the positive changes embraced by humanity, which include a reduction of working hours and of superfluous production and consumption, in order to produce only necessary goods; using technology to enhance socioecological well-being; and eliminating unnecessary mobility. Some of the drawings show a reverse human appropriation of net primary productivity in which vegetation takes over obsolete and unnecessary infrastructure (highways, gas stations) or enhances current urban spaces. Other drawings depict decentralized and localized clean-energy production, agroecological practices, and the displacement of individual vehicles by public transportation and biking.<sup>196</sup> The next series of drawings explicitly proposes degrowth as a way to escape the maladies of capitalism and to create a just and sustainable society for all, free of soft and hard pollution. The main vignette features a very appealing town whose streets are vibrant

196 Brieva, *Memorias de la tierra*, 163.

public spaces where all people can enjoy a pleasant, non-commodified life. The four smaller vignettes that follow in this section indicate how to achieve that kind of life: liberate the mind from hegemonic prejudices, reduce overproduction and working hours, socially guarantee what is needed for the reproduction of a good life, and enjoy what you have.<sup>197</sup> The following series, 'Instrucciones para cambiar el mundo' (Instructions for Changing the World), recognizes the need to combat the current model of economic growth and recommends employing critical thinking, avoiding exposure to discourses that poison the mind (advertising, corporate media), reducing consumption, rethinking mobility, opposing neoliberal political parties, and channeling collective energy to imagine a different world.<sup>198</sup> The page in Chapter 9 that contains genuine quotes from authors includes several critiques of the growth paradigm and an invitation to create and embrace a degrowth society.<sup>199</sup>

Another section of the final chapter, 'El gran salto revolucionario' (The Big (R)evolutionary Jump), combines the words for revolution and evolution in its title and urges us to adopt an ecological economics paradigm with ecofeminist roots in which we learn to take care of each other and live better while reducing entropic activity. Again, an invitation to expand the political limits of the possible through a decolonized imagination is extended:

Todo nuestro potencial creativo dedicado a ensanchar lo imaginable, y no a vendernos una y otra vez la misma moto estropeada ... Toda nuestra inventiva y nuestra ciencia centrada en resolver los verdaderos problemas (salud, recuperación ambiental, energías renovables) y no en fabricar más y más chismes inútiles.<sup>200</sup>

[All our creative potential dedicated to expand the imaginable, and not to sell us the same broken motorcycle over and over again ... All our ingenuity and science focusing on the real issues (health, environmental restoration, renewable energies) and not on producing more and more useless stuff]

In the last vignette of this chapter, two characters escape from the frame that contains them and begin to think outside the epistemological limitations of the dominant imaginary. After naming many Spanish degrowth activists and thinkers in the acknowledgments, Miguel Brieva extends his thanks

197 Brieva, *Memorias de la tierra*, 164.

198 Brieva, *Memorias de la tierra*, 165.

199 Brieva, *Memorias de la tierra*, 166.

200 Brieva, *Memorias de la tierra*, 167.

a todas aquellas mujeres y hombres que piensan y sienten el mundo como un hogar común, hermoso y único, que merece ser salvaguardado de la estupidez devoradora de nuestro sistema actual y preservado para las generaciones futuras.<sup>201</sup>

[to all those men and women who think of and feel the world as a common home, beautiful and unique, that deserves to be protected from the devouring stupidity of our current system and preserved for future generations]

*Memorias de la tierra* does not advocate reruralization, but a new metabolic order in which humans learn to live better by creating just communities with reduced material and energy intensity.

Many cultural practices today rethink the city model by revisiting the food system. A recent book by Daniel López García, *Producir alimentos, reproducir comunidad* (Produce Food, Reproduce Community), elaborates on the need to radically change the global food system, emphasizing the many social and ecological virtues of agroecology and providing examples.<sup>202</sup> Agro-industrial practices are the greatest contributors to the metabolic rift and the increased unsustainability of the linear rural-urban model. The main problem is the conception of the rural as the space where food is produced and the urban as the locus of its consumption; Germán Labrador observes 'that the social circulation of food and food images is a decisive contributing factor in the symbolic landscape of the crisis'.<sup>203</sup> Challenges to the prevailing view of agriculture as a strictly rural phenomenon include the spread of communitarian urban gardening in Iberian cities since 2008 as well as organic agricultural co-operatives that integrate producers and consumers (community-supported agriculture) to create an urban food system that is socioecologically sound. These projects can engage in broad exchange practices beyond food and significantly transform socioeconomic relations, as in the case of the Cooperativa Integral Calatana (CIC).

In *El jardín Escondido: espacios verdes en la ciudad* (The Hidden Garden: Green Spaces in the City, 2013), Pilar Sampietro and Ignacio Somovilla celebrate 12 successful urban gardens in Barcelona.<sup>204</sup> Madrid also boasts a number of successful examples, among them BAH (¡Bajo el asfalto está

201 Brieua, *Memorias de la tierra*, 175.

202 Daniel López García, *Producir alimentos, reproducir comunidad* (Madrid: Libros en acción, 2015).

203 Labrador Méndez, 'The Cannibal Wave', 244.

204 Pilar Sampietro and Ignacio Somovilla, *El jardín Escondido: espacios verdes en la ciudad / The Hidden Garden: Green Spaces in the City* (Barcelona: Pol-len Edicions, 2013).

la huerta!) [Under the Asphalt Is the Garden!], which has been operating since 2000. BAH is a participatory project developed and self-managed by local collectives operating outside of capitalist institutions. It promotes education in agroecology and organizes workshops and convivial activities for the community. The name of the collective explicitly points to the need to change the linear urban metabolism in order to generate a more resilient and circular one: if asphalt disrupts the cycle of nutrients and water, the ecological garden enhances it. Another example is the Network of Urban Gardens in Madrid, a group of collectives of urban agriculture devoted to sharing knowledge, support, and agricultural supplies. If the dominant imaginary is ‘based on the masking of the biopolitical links connecting nutrition, economy and society’, as Labrador suggests, the agroecological urban practices mentioned above contribute, instead, to connect these dots and make the links visible.<sup>205</sup> Once the connections are made, the neoliberal fantasies and their ideology of disconnection are exposed. Labrador also deconstructs the neoliberal rationality deeply ingrained in some television cooking shows that have become very popular during the ongoing crisis.<sup>206</sup> The hegemonic imaginary is rooted even in our gastronomic cultural imagination!

Many other examples of postgrowth urban imaginaries have emerged across the Iberian Peninsula. The 15-*Macampadas* (encampments) proliferating in public squares have been interpreted as collective creations of alternative urban spaces. The Acampada Sol in Madrid, for instance, has been described as a ‘nonneoliberal city within the neoliberal city’.<sup>207</sup> Luis Moreno-Caballud explains that ‘in Sol, a city was built in four days. In spite of the urgency, they created a daily life rich with activities’.<sup>208</sup> This multifunctional inclusive city (which included a library, kitchen, flower garden, and communications center), employed the collective intelligence and diverse knowledge and skills of its participants to create a space where mutual care and collaboration was prioritized over competition and accumulation.<sup>209</sup> The 15-*M acampadas* created spaces where specific solutions to real problems were collectively negotiated and solved without the mediation of capitalist institutions. Of course, these spaces were transient and impossible to maintain for extended periods, but they created networks and synergies for new political platforms and transformative projects. The camps also showed the possibility of

205 Labrador Méndez, ‘The Cannibal Wave’, 244.

206 Labrador Méndez, ‘The Cannibal Wave’, 246–251.

207 Moreno-Caballud, *Cultures of Anyone*, 197.

208 Moreno-Caballud, *Cultures of Anyone*, 195.

209 Moreno-Caballud, *Cultures of Anyone*, 194–197.

developing desirable postgrowth urban practices despite their embedment in a hostile neoliberal city.

Perhaps the most consistent effort to envision and put into practice a desirable postgrowth urban imaginary is found in the transition towns movement. This movement started in 2005 in Totnes (Devon, UK) with the goal of transforming towns and cities addicted to fossil fuel into resilient socioecological systems that can respond to the challenges brought about by peak oil and climate change. In *The Transition Handbook: From Oil Dependency to Local Resilience*, Totnes resident Rob Hopkins outlines the steps for beginning the transition to self-reliance in any community (not just towns, but virtually any human settlement).<sup>210</sup> Currently, there are hundreds of transition projects in over 50 countries. The transition movement strategically creates the conditions for a community to improve its resiliency (the capacity of a system to recover, adapt, and thrive in the face of disruptions) by applying permaculture principles that improve the socioecological well-being of the local community while decarbonizing its operational capacities. These projects are initiated by community members and can only flourish by gaining the support, participation, and engagement of the local population and its institutions. The outcome is usually a much more pleasant and egalitarian urban environment for the community. The movement embraces an assertive and positive attitude that emphasizes the benefits of transitioning (improving quality of life, fostering social cohesion, enhancing the environment) and employs research on the psychology of change and participatory methodologies to facilitate collective and horizontal communication, synergy, and self-management.

The first book about the transition movement written in a language other than English, *Guía del movimiento de transición: cómo transformar tu vida en la ciudad* by Juan del Río, was published in Spain in 2015.<sup>211</sup> Much like Hopkins's book, it outlines the resources and steps needed to begin a transition movement in any town, based on the knowledge produced by current initiatives and experiences. The first Spanish transition groups emerged in 2008–2009. The number of initiatives increased after the 15-M movement, and by 2015 more than 50 groups had been established and three Iberian Transition Conferences had been held.<sup>212</sup> These groups interact, cooperate, and share experiences and knowledge through the Red de

210 Rob Hopkins, *The Transition Handbook: From Oil Dependency to Local Resilience* (Totnes: Green Books, 2008).

211 Juan Del Río, *Guía del movimiento de transición: cómo transformar tu vida en la ciudad* (Madrid: Catarata, 2015).

212 Del Río, *Guía del movimiento de transición*, 80–82.

Transición España. In Spain, the transition movement is closely aligned and integrated with other movements with similar goals, such as the degrowth, ecovillages, and permaculture movements. The transition movement also collaborates with the Postpetroleum Municipalities wiki and its magazine for a new civilization, *15/15\15*.<sup>213</sup> It has created a number of workshops and activities to nourish and foster communitarian creativity, such as Jorge Carrasco's 'art for the transition' workshops, whose goal is the creation of transition stories.<sup>214</sup> For, as Del Río recognizes,

Las palabras, nuestro lenguaje e historias son en cierta medida el límite de nuestra imaginación, y actualmente las historias dominantes hablan del poder de la tecnología, del crecimiento económico sin límites y de la cultura de la separación, de uno mismo de los demás y del mundo que nos rodea. Precisamos de la creación de nuevas narraciones, más apropiadas para los tiempos que corren.<sup>215</sup>

[Words, languages, and stories are in a way the limits of our imagination, and currently the dominant stories talk about the power of technology, limitless economic growth, and the culture of separation from oneself, others, and the world around us. We need to create new narratives that are more appropriate for our current context]

Two examples of these new postgrowth narrations can be found in a collection of post-transition stories titled *Tapas de un futuro pospetróleo* (Covers of a Post-petroleum Future) and the first issue (issue 0) of *15/15\15*.<sup>216</sup>

The inaugural issue of *15/15\15: Revista para una nueva civilización* (Journal for a New Civilization) was financed by crowdfunding and published in 2015 under a Creative Commons license.<sup>217</sup> This first issue, named 2030-05, contains contributions in five Iberian languages (Basque, Catalan, Galician, Portuguese, and Spanish). The magazine has the explicit intention of creating a critical and independent media platform able to break away from the inertia of the dominant imaginary of economic growth. The three fifteens (*15/15\15*) in the name of the magazine, along with the subheading (2030-05), are meant to suggest that the publication is celebrating its fifteenth anniversary in 2030, when only 15 percent of global fossil fuel remains, and its contributors are reflecting on the last 15 years. This is the

213 Del Río, *Guía del movimiento de transición*, 83.

214 Del Río, *Guía del movimiento de transición*, 120–127.

215 Del Río, *Guía del movimiento de transición*, 127.

216 Del Río, *Guía del movimiento de transición*, 127.

217 The issue is available for download at <https://www.15-15-15.org/webzine/num-0-mayo-2030-es/>.

end of the fossil fuel regime, 'la energía con la que el petróleo había venido sosteniendo la Civilización del Crecimiento' [the energy that has sustained the Growth Civilization], as the editorial introducing the magazine points out.<sup>218</sup> The 29 contributions, grouped in sections on analysis, practice, and creation, provide fictional perspectives on the 15-year period that marks the end of the age of capitalist petromodernity and the transition to the new economic, cultural, social, and ecological system that is emerging from its ruins. The tensions between the desire to construct a new functional society and the cruel optimism of those who refuse to let go of the old paradigm are described, sometimes in the form of intergenerational conflicts. While most of the texts point out the many social difficulties brought about by the demise of capitalism, such as rapid energy decline, tightened material restrictions, environmental deterioration, and the injustices ingrained in the dominant imaginary, none of the narratives depicts an apocalyptic or dystopic future. The postgrowth transition is viewed as a worthwhile but continual work-in-progress facing innumerable obstacles.

The magazine's pages are not populated with individual heroes, benevolent elites, technological miracles, or rapid panaceas, but rather collective, patient efforts to unlearn hegemonic habits and relearn forgotten communal knowledge and skills that will enable us to repurpose existing technologies and institutions to solve pressing problems. The expert knowledge of neoliberal technocrats (useful only if cheap energy is widely available) is replaced with a much more open and flexible collective intelligence that functions in diverse ways to meet the specific needs of each community. New noncapitalist modes of social reproduction are organized along decentralized and resilient lines favoring communal and collective property over private ownership. There is no homogeneous image of the transition, as different stories focus on specific local and regional examples and their peculiarities. But in most of these narratives, although the dominant imaginary and its power have not been completely eradicated and the possibility of ecofascist reactions is still latent, a process of economic deglobalization is empowering communities to create new social structures. A renovated lexicon also marks the ongoing epistemological decolonization, as the euphemistic and misleading rhetoric disseminated by neoliberal media (creation of wealth, growth, development, financial crisis, unemployment, markets, externalities) is replaced by clear and critical terms describing the material and symbolic reality of the hegemonic order—*La Gran Estafa* (The Big Fraud), *final de la Era del Petróleo* (the end of the Fossil Fuel Period), *Decrecimiento* (Degrowth), *Caos Climático* (Climatic Chaos), *declive energético* (energy decline), etc.

218 'Editorial: 2015+15', 15/15\15 *Revista para una nueva civilización* 0 (2015): 1.

Some of the stories depict new rural communities without implying the disappearance of the urban world. Of course, without fossil fuels, urban models and lifestyles are unlikely to resemble those of a Petropolis. Henrique Pérez Lijó speaks of the ‘urban peak’ and the need to revisit our use of territory.<sup>219</sup> He refers to the ‘desintegración do urbano en múltiples configuracións de novidosos estilos de vida, dificilmente etiquetábeis baixo a dicotomía rural-urbano’ [breakup of cities into multiple configurations of new lifestyles that are difficult to classify under the rural-urban dichotomy].<sup>220</sup> In similar terms, Adrián Almazán describes a series of urban mutations:

Los grandes aglomerados urbanos han tenido que reestructurarse casi íntegramente ante la disminución crítica de combustibles fósiles. En la mayoría de las ciudades los barrios han recuperado su autonomía tanto política como espacial, volviendo a generarse cinturones verdes entre las zonas urbanizadas encaminados a la producción de alimentos (mediante el cultivo y mediante la creación de bosques comestibles).<sup>221</sup>

[The big metropolitan areas have had to drastically restructure themselves, given the critical decline of fossil fuels. In most cities the neighborhoods have regained their political and spatial autonomy, generating green belts between urbanized areas to produce food (through the creation of food gardens and edible forests)]

These narratives target both the material and the symbolic hegemony for, as David Harvey reminds us, the city we inhabit molds our current subjectivities and conditions our daily possibilities, and thus neoliberal urbanization reduces the possibility of a desirable postcapitalist society from emerging. In theory and in practice, the transition movement claims that living spaces should be the product of a participatory process shaped by the communities inhabiting them with the goal of enhancing their well-being through the use of decentralized and convivial tools managed and determined by each community.

On Juan del Río’s website, the section titled *Tapas de un futuro pospetróleo* includes seven transition stories by different authors. The purpose of these stories is to reactivate our political imagination in order to envision

219 Henrique Pérez Lijó, ‘O cénit da concentración urbana. Análise das mudanzas nos asentamentos humanos no inicio do colapso’, 15/15/15 *Revista para una nueva civilización* o (2015): 34.

220 Lijó, ‘O cénit da concentración urbana’, 35.

221 Adrián Almazán, ‘Amoeiro’, 15/15/15 *Revista para una nueva civilización* o (2015): 92.

a post-petroleum future.<sup>222</sup> The stories are followed by references to counterhegemonic books that inspired the authors and which the reader can consult. Some questions function as starting points to trigger the imaginative process:

¿cómo podría ser la vida en unas décadas, después de años de transición hacia una sociedad más local, resiliente y menos dependiente de los combustibles fósiles? ¿Cómo satisfaríamos nuestras necesidades básicas? ¿Cómo nos organizaríamos? ¿Cómo sería el proceso de cambio?

[What would our lives be like in a few decades, after a few years transitioning towards a more local and resilient society less addicted to fossil fuels? How are we going to satisfy our basic needs? How are we going to organize? What would the process of change look like?]

The project recognizes the power of stories to change the imaginary: 'Las narraciones y las historias tienen el gran poder de crear un nuevo imaginario, y esto es clave para la construcción de un futuro alternativo' [Narratives and stories have great power to create a new imaginary, and this is key to constructing an alternative future].

The stories comprising *Tapas de un futuro pospetróleo* describe a variety of possible measures to be adopted during the transition to a postgrowth society. In 'Barcelona 2030. Territorio comestible' (Barcelona 2030: Edible Territory), Pilar Sampietro envisions a regenerative Barcelona where the disproportionate amount of urban space previously monopolized by individual vehicles is now occupied by edible landscapes, including urban gardens and small forests (a reverse human appropriation of net primary productivity that liberates previously human-appropriated ecological space for the use of other species).<sup>223</sup> The city has a circular metabolism that not only does not pollute, but also helps the healing process by enhancing sink capabilities and natural purification and detox processes, thereby shrinking the metabolic rift. In 'La sociedad post-tecnológica' (The Post-technologic Society), Jordi Pigem depicts life in 2039, after the systemic crisis of 2008 spelled the end of the growth society and its paradigm.<sup>224</sup> The homodiegetic narrator reports that cities collapsed as soon as they lost their daily injections of food and energy, and that the larger the metropolis,

222 Juan Del Río, *Tapas de un futuro pospetróleo*, <http://juandelrio.net/tapas-de-un-futuro-pospetroleo/>.

223 Pilar Sampietro, 'Barcelona 2030. Territorio comestible', <http://juandelrio.net/tapas-de-un-futuro-pospetroleo/barcelona-2030-territorio-comestible/>.

224 Jordi Pigem, 'La sociedad post-tecnológica', <http://juandelrio.net/tapas-de-un-futuro-pospetroleo/la-sociedad-post-tecnologica/>.

the less able it was to adapt to the transition. ‘Ahora son almacenes de materiales’ [Now cities are warehouses of materials], the narrator says, referring to the unsustainable linear metabolism characterizing modern cities and their tendency to accumulate material inputs instead of reusing them in a circular fashion. In Quim Nogueras’s ‘Velas y recuerdos’ (Candles and Memories), an elderly man remembers the past and explains to his grandchildren the widespread changes that humanity experienced after the collapse of petromodernity.<sup>225</sup> In this case, the transition succeeded thanks to the implementation of an agroecological food system and the reduction of superfluous consumption. Àngels Castellarnau’s ‘Si las paredes hablaran’ (If Walls Could Talk) describes the paradigm shift in architecture that accompanied the transition her story narrates, a change from massive over-construction that pillages materials and energy to biodesigns based on local breathable materials, energy sufficiency, comfort, and adaptation to regional climatic conditions.<sup>226</sup> The envisioned futures articulated by these stories grow from the many counterhegemonic seeds planted during the last few decades that have been nourished by countless ongoing collective initiatives.

One of the most overlooked crises of our time is the widespread privatization of public urban space. In an informative and disturbing op-ed piece published in *The Guardian* in November 2015, Saskia Sassen warns us of the post-2008 tendency towards large-scale ‘corporate buying of urban buildings and land’, which has ‘significant implications for equity, democracy and rights’.<sup>227</sup> Sassen confirms that ‘foreign corporate buying of properties from 2013 to 2014 grew by ... 180% in Madrid’. This process entails foreclosing on modest buildings and replacing them with exclusive luxury mega-projects with vast footprints and no public access or social utility for locals. The resultant privatized and de-urbanized city prevents any relevant political, cultural, or social use of urban space at all. The small but meaningful marginal spaces once inhabited by powerless people within modern capitalist cities are now completely appropriated by the new extreme neoliberal metropolis. In corporate cities no epistemological or cultural diversity can flourish outside the dominant imaginary. If postindustrial neoliberal cities offer no place for the peasants of the world—who were and still are forced to migrate *en masse* to the city after being dispossessed

225 Quim Nogueras, ‘Velas y recuerdos’, <http://juandelrio.net/tapas-de-un-futuro-positivo/velas-y-recuerdos/>.

226 Àngels Castellarnau, ‘Si las paredes hablaran’, <http://juandelrio.net/tapas-de-un-futuro-positivo/si-las-paredes-hablaran/>.

227 Sassen, ‘Who Owns Our Cities’.

of their livelihood by global capitalism—what spaces are going to sustain these surplus populations? We do not know. But we do know that capitalism is generating more and more surplus population without providing it with a place or a function in the dominant system. On the one hand, this creates the potential for emancipatory movements to emerge, yet on the other it may foster reactionary tendencies (more on this in Chapter 3). The outcome depends on what kind of imaginaries are activated and how. Some communities strive to strategically produce their own spaces instead of remaining passive and reactionary. Such activism entails not only challenging the material order, but collectively imagining and practicing new ways of thinking and of inhabiting the world, namely, postgrowth urban imaginaries. It is time to recognize that the spaces which the dominant imaginary celebrates as monuments of progress are only made possible by the accelerated and intensified production of planetary landscapes of violence and extractive geographies (the massive biological annihilation and social exploitation brought about by the Capitalocene). It seems to me that moving towards postgrowth urban imaginaries is a necessary condition for the flourishing of regenerative radical geographies of justice and prosperity for all earthlings.

